Life

The Native American Cultural Programs: A place of history and acceptance

by Jaylyn Davis
STAFF WRITER
SHE/HER/THEY/THEM
iue25001@uconn.edu

The University of Connecticut's Student Union is a hub of unity and inclusion. Inside, there are four cultural centers and two cultural programs, one being the Native American Cultural Programs (NACP)

Located beside The Coop, the NACP is decked with Native American spirit. Scattered on the walls are diverse Native American paintings portraying various Indigenous tribes and leaders. There are also images of some of the NACP's memorable events, such as their end of year celebration.

The NACP is meant to give a space for UConn students who are of Native American and Indigenous descent, according to Chris Newell, a Native American and Indigenous studies instructor in residence who's the director of the cultural programs.

"The main thing is to let Native students that are on this campus know that this is a welcoming space for them," Newell said. "That this is a Native space different from everywhere else, and they can authentically be themselves while they're here."

Newell said while the NACP is dedicated to fostering a space for Native American and indigenous students, anybody can visit it.

"At the same time, we service not just Native students but the entire campus because the space is open to all students," Newell said. "If you want to come in and just learn, you can."

Many people come to the NACP, according to Ahniaya Anderson, a third-semester nursing major who's a part of the cultural programs' student staff.

"A lot of students like to come in here and eat when it's really busy or just come in here and do work," Anderson said.

Anderson said those who come to the NACP generally have positive experiences. She also said its workers, such as herself, love working there.

"I like that I'm able to greet people and provide a safe space for them," Anderson said. "I also like being able to help out with the different events that we host and helping connect people."

The NACP was established in 2016, according to Newell.

"It didn't really start to take off until a student named Sage Phillips showed up in 2018," Newell said. "From there, the program started to become a cultural program."

Phillips graduated from UConn with a bachelor's degree in political science and human rights in 2022, according to an article in UConn Today. Newell said she contributed a lot to the NACP. In 2018, she founded the Native American and Indigenous Student Association (NAISA), an organization dedicated to representing Native American and indigenous students on campus. The meetings consist of discussing current issues, traditions, events and more, according to the program's description.

NAISA's founding was a significant milestone in the NACP, according to Newell. It helped increase Native American and indigenous representation on campus. Furthermore, it helped expand the NACP's network by including more Native American and Indigenous resources.



A Native American and Indigenous studies instructor and Director of Native American Cultural Programs Chris Newell (right) poses for a photo. Newell focuses on creating a welcoming space for Native students.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PROJECT ON INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT ON LINKEDIN

Besides the NAISA, the NACP has two mentorship programs: UConn Indigenous Nations Cultural and Educational Exhange (UCINCEE) and UConn Native and Indigenous Students and Scholars Network (UNISSN).

"UNISSN is meant for older NACP students to mentor younger NACP students," Newell said.

In the program, continuing Native American and Indigenous students serve as mentors to first-year and transfer Native American and indigenous students. The goal of this program is to help Native American and indigenous students thrive at UConn while connecting with its indigenous community, according to the NACP's website.

While UNISSN solely focuses on UConn students, UCINCEE works for middle and high school students. In the program, UConn students work with them to design a project that promotes indigenous cultures and people, according to the program's description.

Newell said while the programs have been beneficial, they're currently facing some challenges.

"It's been successful, but right now they are dormant because the number of Native students on campus that are active at NACP is not high enough right now for me to run the programs," Newell said.

Another program in the NACP is the Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative (NAISI). The initiative is a significant resource for research, outreach and scholarship among the indigenous community, according to its description. Numerous UConn faculty are involved in the initiative. One is Kat Milligan-McClellan, an assistant molecular and cell biology professor. Another is April Anson, an assistant English professor.

Besides programs and initiatives, the NACP hosts many events throughout the year, according to Newell.

"Last Friday, a beading artist came in, and we had kind of a small workshop," Newell said.

Newell said the event was called Beading with Althnageebah Myles. In the event, Myles, who's Navajo and Mohegan, taught attendees how to create Native American earrings and other artwork.

Newell said the event was hosted to celebrate Native American and Indigenous Heritage Month. He also said the event was educational for those who came.

"They got to learn, you know, from an actual artist," Newell said.

Another major NACP event is UConn Spring Pow Wow, where many Native American tribes gather and celebrate their cultures together. Many things happen in the event; there are games, contests, tribal dances and food.

Some of the NACP's events have catering, according to Newell. In one of the NACP's most recent events, a chef named Sherry Pocknett catered for it.

"She is a Wampanoag chef, and she was the first and only Indigenous female chef to win the James Beard Award, which is like the Academy Award," Newell said.

In addition to events, the NACP celebrates certain holidays, the biggest being Indigenous People's Day.

"The Indigenous People's Day is in place of Columbus Day on this campus, so we celebrate that," Newell said.

In the future, Newell hopes that the NACP will become a cultural center.

"We have less funding and we only have me as director," Newell said. "I only have student staff, and I don't have an assistant director. But hopefully, that's going to change."

Newell said the NACP becoming a cultural center will also increase representation for UConn's indigenous community as well as the NACP itself.

"I know there's more Native students on campus, and a lot of them just don't know where we are and what we offer," Newell said.

To learn more about the NACP, its events and its programs, check out its website.

SUBOG Weekly Events:

November 15th - November 22nd

November 18th – Comedy Bingo @ 7PM in the Student Union Theatre

November 19th – Asian Cultural Night @ 7PM in the BUSN 106

Any questions? Email subog@uconn.edu!



The University of Connecticut Native American Cultural Programs graphic shows a variety of bold, dynamic colors. The NACP has four cultural centers and two cultural programs.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @UCONN_NACP ON INSTAGRAM