As the sun set over Arizona Stadium on Sept. 2, attendees at the Wildcats home opener against Northern Arizona were given a rare opportunity.

During the football game's halftime, leaders and youth council members from Arizona's four O'odham tribes – the Ak-Chin Indian Community, the Gila River Indian Community, the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community and the Tohono O'odham Nation – streamed onto the field, gathered at the center, and arranged themselves in a circle. They then sang a sacred song and played traditional gourd rattles before the tens of thousands in the stadium crowd.

The musical interlude was one of several during the game that were designed to honor the sovereignty of all of Arizona's 22 federally recognized tribes, with an emphasis on the O'odham tribes, whose people are native to the Sonoran Desert. Before kickoff, attendees also watched a video of University leaders reciting the land acknowledgement statement, which recognizes the University's location on the homelands of the O'odham and Yaqui.

Shania Little Feather Manuel, a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" alongside the Tohono O'odham Nation color guard.

During other displays on the field during other game breaks, President Robert C. Robbins and Levi Esquerra, the University's senior vice president for Native American advancement and tribal engagement, whose office organized the mid-game programming in partnership with the tribes, recognized tribal leaders.

The traditional display that happened during halftime is rarely shared with non-tribal members, said Christina C. Bell Andrews, a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation and executive director of the University's Wassaja Carlos Montezuma Center for Native American Health, who attended the game and helped organize the events.

"I literally cried because I knew that this community is rarely experienced if at all in front of non-tribal people," she said. "We as O'odham had not been united in this fashion for well over a decade. What I witnessed was truly historic. It blew me away."

The display at the football game, Andrews said, emphasized the significance of the trust and relationships that the University has built and continues to build with Native nations through research, educational offerings and other programs that serve tribal communities and students.

"The tribes need the University just as much as the University needs the tribes," she said. "It was vulnerable for them to participate in such a public forum, sharing a part of them that is so sacred, but it illustrates their optimism for opportunities and collaboration with the University of Arizona."

The displays at the game also highlighted the University's ongoing commitment, Esquerra said, to "be the leading institution in serving Native Americans." That commitment is codified in Pillar 3 of the University's Strategic Plan, which emphasizes the University's strengths as Arizona's land-grant institution.

"I want tribes to come to us with anything they think the University of Arizona can be a resource for," Esquerra added. "Everything we're doing is a step in that direction."

The University recognizes November as Native American Heritage Month and currently has more than 800 students who identify as American Indian or Alaska Natives. The National Science Foundation ranked the University as the top doctorate-granting institution for American Indian or Alaska Native students in 2021, the most recent year that the survey for the ranking was conducted.

The University has undertaken a host of recent initiatives and programs to serve Native communities and students. They include:

The University published a new Tribal Consultation Policy in September. The policy aims to guide University personnel in collaborating with tribes in ways that respect tribes' cultures, traditions, sovereignty and laws.

The University unveiled a sign outside Arizona Stadium in late August with a description of the building in the language of the San Carlos Apache. The addition reads "Dagonitnané zhi nadagonitkaad," which translates to "we will
fight until we win." The unveiling was part of an ongoing effort to add the languages of Arizona's Native tribes to building signs across campus. Old Main's sign, unveiled in April, includes the Hopi word "Kiisonvi," referring to "the focal point of a community where thoughts and prayers become one to benefit all life." And the Communication building sign, which in early 2022 became the first to have a Native language added, includes the Tohono O'odham phrase "N'okí Macíg Ki:" for "place of the study of language."

The Arizona Tribal Sovereignty Forum in September brought together legal experts and tribal leaders on campus to discuss the impact of recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions that affect Native American communities. The Office of Native American Advancement and Tribal Engagement presented the forum in partnership with the Agnese Nelms Haury Program in Environment and Social Justice.

Native FORGE welcomed its second cohort of entrepreneurs, who are from the Fort Yuma Quechan Tribe. The program, which supports entrepreneurs from federally recognized Native American tribes in Arizona, was launched last year with a cohort from the San Carlos Apache Tribe.

The Southwest Institute for Research on Women expanded its New Dawn-Warrior Women program with a $1.1 million grant from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The program helps Native American clients with substance use recovery while incorporating Native American culture and traditions.

The University held the second Tribal Leaders Summit in November, gathering University and tribal leaders at the College of Medicine – Phoenix to discuss health sciences research and programs at the University that serve Native American communities.

The James E. Rogers College of Law in September launched its Land-Grant History Project. The project is a website, researched and built by a team from the Daniel F. Cracchiolo Law Library, that documents the story of the University's land-grant status and the designation's impact on Indigenous peoples in Arizona.

The University opened its first tribal microcampus, to serve the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, in September 2022. The microcampus provides training opportunities in fields the tribe has prioritized based on its workforce needs, including: tribal courts and justice administration; tribal economic development; Indigenous governance; and tribal natural resource management.

More stories about Native American advancement and tribal engagement efforts at the University are available on the University of Arizona News website.

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