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INDIGENOUS ALLYSHIP IN PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE YAKAMA NATION FROM A HIGH SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper explores how high school students can engage in ethical and respectful allyship with Indigenous communities through technology-related extracurricular projects. Focusing on a case study involving a student-led initiative with the Yakama Nation, it introduces a framework of six core principles—Exposure, Engagement, Empowerment, Teaching, Accessibility, and Acknowledgement—that guided the project's development. The study highlights how students can educate themselves on Indigenous histories, collaborate meaningfully with community members, and design projects that support local goals while avoiding paternalism. Through book donations, cross-cultural dialogue, and long-term relationship-building, the project demonstrated how youth can help bridge digital divides and contribute to inclusive education. The findings suggest that with humility, commitment, and active listening, young people can play a valuable role in supporting Indigenous self-determination and promoting equity in technology initiatives.

Keywords

Indigenous Allyship, High School Student, Yakama, Ethics

Introduction

Indigenous allyship involves non-Indigenous people actively supporting Indigenous communities through respectful, informed and collaborative action. In the context of high school student extracurricular activities, allyship means using one's skills and social privilege to "walk beside, not in front of" Indigenous peoples on projects that those communities deem beneficial. This stance is crucial given that educational systems can either perpetuate colonial patterns or serve as tools for empowerment. Historical mainstream education systems often marginalize Indigenous groups by excluding their languages, cultures, and knowledge systems – a phenomenon that has contributed to systemic underrepresentation and misrepresentation in curricula (Battiste, 2013). In response movements advocating Indigenous educational and narrative sovereignty have emerged, emphasizing that Indigenous nations must control the content, structure, and purpose of their own educational initiatives. (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). The approach is consistent with international principles of self-determination, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007). The urgency of these principles is underscored by persistent educational inequalities. In the United States, many indigenous communities face stark disparities in access to culturally relevant resources: libraries are often under resourced and under funded, Indigenous literature is limited in school curriculums, and few educational materials reflect Indigenous worldviews (Battiste, 2013). Such inequalities hamper learning and cultural affirmation, making it critical that educational initiatives in Indigenous contexts are equitable and community led (Lee, 2015). At the same time, there is a growing momentum to include Indigenous perspectives in education design and governance. In curricular planning and community learning spaces, Indigenous educators and allies are working towards inclusive practices that honor Indigenous knowledge and storytelling traditions.

Youth have a significant role to play in these efforts. High school students today are emerging civic leaders capable of driving social change. Empowering Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) youth with opportunities to contribute to community based learning projects –such as book drives, tutoring programs, or library creation–has been shown to benefit both students and their communities (Elum, 2024; Ozer, 2017). When non-indigenous students partner with Indigenous peers and mentors, they can help ensure educational efforts are

shaped by and for Indigenous communities rather than imposed from the outside. Youth allyship–grounded in humility, learning and co-creation–thus contributes to decolonizing education and fostering more inclusive learning environments (Constanza-Chock, 2020).

This paper explores what Indigenous allyship entails for American high school students in the context of extracurricular activities. We begin with a literature review on the intersections of education, equity, and Indigenous communities, highlighting key challenges and participatory approaches (in curriculum development, community literacy, and cultural inclusion). We then present a framework for ethical allyship adapted from (Bennett et al. 2024), identifying six components of practice: Exposure, Engagement, Empowerment, Teaching, Accessibility, and Acknowledgement. Next, we apply this framework to a case study of a student-led project with the Yakama nation, showing how these principles unfold in practice. Finally, we discuss broader implications for Indigenous educational sovereignty, youth participation, and decolonial approaches to learning.

Literature Review

Indigenous communities have experienced systemic marginalization in relation to education – both in terms of access to educational materials and inclusion in curriculum. Part of this stems from broader historical marginalization. Colonial policies in the United States and Canada not only dispossessed Indigenous peoples of land, but also sought to suppress their languages and knowledge systems (e.g. through boarding schools and curriculum erasure). As noted, many Indigenous tribes and nations lack access to adequate educational resources. In many rural Indigenous communities, schools face shortages of up-to-date, culturally responsive textbooks and learning materials (McMahon et al., 2020). This educational divide means that Indigenous students often cannot fully engage with a curriculum that is reflective of their needs, putting them at a major disadvantage in terms of education. Efforts are being made to close this gap but significant inequality remains (McMahon el al., 2020).

Another facet of marginalization is underrepresentation in educational leadership and enrichment opportunities. Indigenous students are significantly underrepresented in school leadership roles, student clubs, honors programs, and other decision-making structures. As a result, when school policies, curriculums, or extracurricular activities are shaped, Indigenous perspectives are seldom present at the table. This can lead to learning environments that inadvertently ignore or even alienate Indigenous students. For example, enrichment programs may overlook Indigenous knowledge systems or leadership styles, making it harder Indigenous students to see themselves reflected in academic success or civic engagement models. Likewise, curriculums until recently have included little to no coverage of indigenous culture and histories, effectively rendering them “invisible” to mainstream school settings. The absence of Indigenous voices in educational structures contributes to what some scholars call “epidemic injustice” or “curricular colonialism,” where the curriculum is centered around the dominant culture’s culture while Indigenous ways of thinking are excluded or undervalued. (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2024). An example is the tokenistic inclusion of Indigenous content only during specific months rather than year round – a symbolic gesture that does not reflect genuine inclusion. This dynamic perpetuates colonial patterns, where Indigenous contributions are constantly sidelined in an education system meant to serve all students (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2024).

Education itself can be a site of marginalization or empowerment, depending on the approach. Traditional curriculums have largely omitted Indigenous contributions to science and technology, which can alienate Indigenous students. However, when Indigenous knowledge is integrated – for instance, teaching about ecological practices developed by Native peoples alongside environmental science – it validates Indigenous identity and enriches the learning for all students. There is a push in some areas for “decolonizing the curriculum”, which overlaps with allyship: non-Indigenous students working alongside Indigenous peers to include Indigenous content and credit Indigenous innovations in STEM fields. Similarly, the open-source movement and community science projects have begun to recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge (such as ancestral agricultural knowledge or star navigation techniques) as equal to Western technical knowledge. Failing to do so is a loss for the global knowledge commons and perpetuates a false hierarchy of knowledge.

One critical concept that has emerged to combat marginalization is Indigenous Educational Sovereignty. This principle asserts that Indigenous peoples have the right to control educational content and narratives about them, and that such materials should reflect their interests, values, and ways of knowing. It’s a direct response to the longstanding practice of schools and education systems adopting curricula, readings, and library materials without Indigenous input–often excluding or misrepresenting Indigenous histories, cultures, and languages. By adopting educational sovereignty frameworks, educators and institutions can ensure that educational curriculums involving indigenous communities are crafted with *permission, mutual benefit, and proper stewardship*. For young educators and students, awareness of these frameworks is part of being an ally. For example, an ally-minded student advocating for a more inclusive school library would ensure that Indigenous authors, languages, and community-approved stories are prioritized and that Indigenous communities have a say in what is taught and read.
Marginalization is also social and cultural. Indigenous students in school settings might face stereotype threat or racism, including racial microaggressions in classrooms, which can push them out of leadership roles or enrichment

opportunities. Creating an inclusive culture in classrooms and extracurricular spaces is therefore a responsibility for allies. This can mean calling out dismissive or prejudiced comments, ensuring Indigenous students have equal access to leadership roles in group activities. Research has shown that representation and belonging significantly improve engagement and retention of Indigenous in academic spaces (Brayboy, 2005). For instance, connecting Indigenous school students with Indigenous or allied mentors can provide good role models and help counter the isolation that they may feel. Likewise, initiatives like student leadership councils, science clubs, cultural groups, etc. can create spaces where Indigenous students can thrive when built around inclusive values. Non-Indigenous students can support and participate in these initiatives as collaborators rather than benevolent helpers, reinforcing a sense of community and shared purpose.

Framework: Components of Indigenous Allyship

Building on the above, we can outline a practical framework for youth engaging in digital allyship. Bennett et al. (2024) offer a six-component model for ethical research partnerships which we adapt to student-led tech projects. The components are **Exposure**, **Engagement**, **Empowerment**, **Teaching**, **Accessibility**, and **Acknowledgement**. Each represents a key question an ally should address: Have I educated myself and handled information carefully (Exposure)? Am I collaborating with the community as true partners (Engagement)? Does this project build the community's capacity and agency (Empowerment)? Who is learning or teaching in this process (Teaching)? Is the initiative inclusive and usable for the community (Accessibility)? And do I recognize the community's contributions and authority (Acknowledgement)? By considering each component, young allies can design projects that are respectful, inclusive, and beneficial.

Figure 1. *the ethical research partnership framework (modified after Bennett et al, 2024)*

Exposure involves both learning about Indigenous contexts and being careful about what information is revealed. Allies must educate themselves on Indigenous history and current issues to ground their work in truth. This could include learning local treaty history or visiting the community to replace stereotypes with real understanding. At the same time, allies should not expose sensitive information without consent. For example, avoid publicizing exact locations of sacred sites or framing a community's situation in a way that invites pity. Balancing raising awareness with respecting privacy is the first step in ethical allyship.

Engagement means developing the project *with* the community, not for them. Allies should consult Indigenous partners from the start, incorporate their ideas and feedback, and establish regular communication. Rather than acting from a distance, engagement requires building relationships—showing up (in person or virtually), listening, and participating. It also entails cultural humility: following local protocols and learning how to interact respectfully. By involving community members in planning and decision-making, a student ally ensures the initiative addresses real needs and that Indigenous participants have agency in every aspect.

Empowerment is about ensuring the project strengthens the community's own capacity and resources. Instead of a one-off aid effort, an ally's project should leave behind skills or tools that the Indigenous community can continue to use independently. This can mean transferring knowledge (e.g., training people to use a new app), providing infrastructure the community requested, or formally handing over control of project outputs to the

community (Bennett et al., 2024). The goal is to avoid creating dependency. The community should emerge more capable and empowered to pursue its priorities using the technology or knowledge introduced.

Teaching in allyship has a dual nature: the ally shares knowledge but also learns from the Indigenous partners. A student ally might educate their peers or the public about Indigenous issues (raising broader awareness) and also teach some technical skills to community members during the project. Conversely, the ally must actively learn from Indigenous experts, elders, or students. By embracing two-way learning, allies show respect—recognizing Indigenous people as teachers and knowledge holders. This reciprocity builds mutual understanding and avoids the mistake of assuming only the ally has expertise.

Accessibility means ensuring the project's benefits are actually reachable and usable for the community. Allies should tailor technologies to the community's conditions. For instance, if internet access is limited, solutions should work offline. Materials should be provided in appropriate languages or formats so that elders and youth alike can engage. Allies must also consider practical barriers: the timing, location, and maintenance of any resource should fit the community's reality. By planning for local needs—whether it's providing user-friendly instructions or choosing low-cost tools—students can eliminate obstacles that might prevent Indigenous participants from fully benefiting from the project.

Acknowledgement is about recognizing Indigenous rights and contributions at every stage. Allies should explicitly credit the community for its knowledge and leadership, and be transparent about their own role as guests or learners. This can include performing land acknowledgements when presenting the work, naming Indigenous collaborators as co-creators, and seeking permission for any data or stories shared publicly. Crucially, acknowledgment means respecting Indigenous sovereignty: the community's authority over how the project is conducted and represented. In practice, an ally defers to the community's decisions on how results are used or publicized and expresses gratitude for the opportunity to partner. This humility and giving of credit reinforce that the project is driven by Indigenous agency, not the ally's heroism.

Case Study: Donating Books and Technology with the Yakama Nation

To illustrate how the six components of Indigenous allyship can be applied in a real-world context, this section presents a case study drawn from the author's extracurricular initiative: the Yakama Empowerment Project. The Yakama Nation, a federally recognized tribe located in the Yakima Valley of Washington State, has historically encountered systemic educational inequities, including under-resourced schools and limited access to culturally relevant learning materials. These challenges, rooted in a broader legacy of marginalization, continue to impact Indigenous youth. In response, the student-led project aimed to support educational opportunities for Yakama students by providing books and learning resources aligned with their needs and interests.

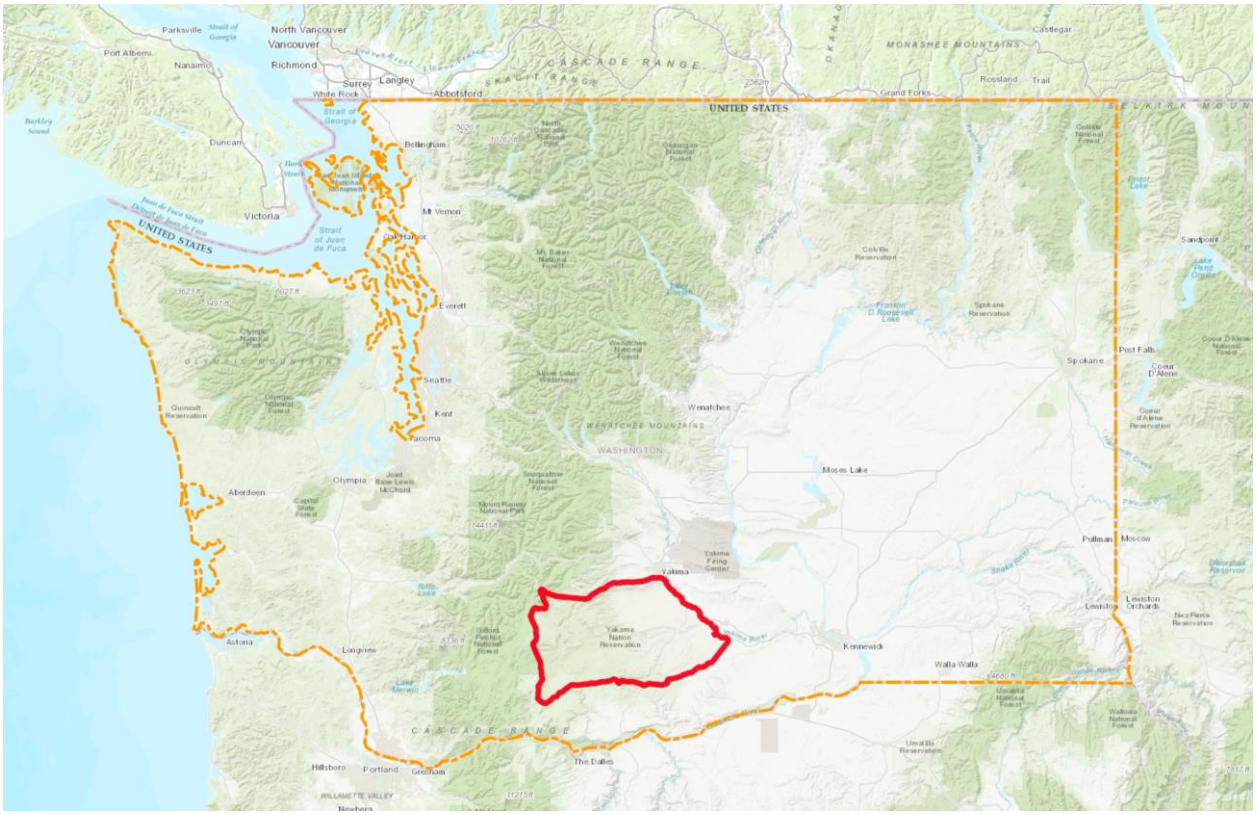

Figure 2. *The Study Area: Yakama Nation outlined in in red*

The project originated during the student's participation in a mission trip to the Yakama Nation, organized by Sacred Road Ministries in partnership with his church. During the visit, he became acquainted with a mobile library initiative established by the church to serve Indigenous children. Subsequent conversations with church representatives revealed a significant shortage of books, exacerbated by the difficulty of replacing titles that had been checked out but not returned. In response, the student—along with a small group of peers—formulated a plan to organize book drives in their local community. They coordinated collection efforts across several schools and engaged family members and friends in contributing to the cause. As a result, they amassed over one thousand books suitable for K–12 readers. These included a diverse array of materials such as science textbooks, children's picture books, and popular youth literature, including series like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, *Fly Guy*, *Magic Tree House*, and *Dog Man*. Once the collection was complete, the student team arranged the transportation of the books to Sacred Road Ministries, working closely with church leaders, many of whom were members of the Yakama community. The day of the delivery involved more than a simple handoff: the students participated in setting up the donated materials and took part in a stone cutting workshop and a reflective dialogue with church elders. These interactions provided meaningful opportunities for cultural exchange and reinforced the collaborative spirit of the project. What follows is an analysis of this initiative using the six-part framework of Indigenous allyship: Exposure, Engagement, Empowerment, Teaching, Accessibility, and Acknowledgement. Each component is examined to identify the ethical considerations, successes, and limitations of the project.

Figure 3. *Book Donation and Cultural Engagement with the Yakama Community. Left: Students Deliver Donated Books to the Sacred Road Mobile Library ("Book'N-It"); Right: Participating in a Yakama Cultural Workshop and Dialogue Event.*

Exposure: From the outset, the student ally recognized the importance of self-education regarding the Yakama Nation's context. This involved learning about Yakama history—including key events such as the Treaty of 1855 and its aftermath—as well as understanding current social challenges on the reservation through both direct conversations with community members and independent research. This initial learning phase aligned with the Exposure component: it enabled the student to look beyond their suburban school environment and develop awareness of the structural disparities impacting Yakama youth. Additionally, the student exercised careful judgment in determining what information to share publicly during the book drive promotions. For example, rather than using phrasing such as "the Yakama Nation has nothing" (which could reinforce pity or harmful stereotypes), the messaging emphasized more affirmative and collaborative goals, such as: "Let's help expand a local Yakama church's library with more books." This thoughtful framing allowed the project to raise awareness while preserving the dignity of the community—acknowledging needs without subjecting them to stigma. One key ethical consideration involved ensuring that any descriptions of the Yakama context were approved by community contacts. By seeking guidance and consent, the student avoided falling into a savior narrative and instead anchored the initiative in mutual respect and shared learning.

Engagement: A critical factor in the project's success was the early initiation and sustained nature of the student's engagement with Sacred Road representatives. Rather than simply collecting books and delivering them unannounced, the student ally involved church leaders from the planning stage onward. In their initial email exchanges, the student posed a range of questions concerning the types of books most needed, as well as any cultural considerations that should be taken into account. This proactive communication ensured that the project was shaped by the community's own articulated priorities—an example of meaningful consultation and

collaboration as outlined in the Engagement component. The Yakama contacts conveyed a preference for children's books, particularly those suited to elementary school readers, though they also welcomed materials for older age groups. Through this dialogue, the student was able to refine and tailor the donation strategy more effectively. Additionally, when the time came to deliver the books, the students opted not to send them remotely. Instead, they visited in person and spent a full day at the church. This in-person interaction with church leaders and community members was instrumental in deepening mutual trust and understanding. The visit affirmed that the relationship was not merely transactional, but grounded in ethical allyship—demonstrated through presence, active listening, and responsiveness to community needs. The project thus illustrates how genuine engagement not only improves tangible outcomes—such as ensuring the right kinds of books are delivered—but also fosters a collaborative partnership in which all voices are respected and valued.

Empowerment: At first glance, a book donation might appear to be a one-directional act of charity rather than a form of empowerment. However, the student intentionally incorporated empowering elements into the design of the project. One key aspect was the deliberate inclusion of books centered on Indigenous perspectives and representation. Psychologically, this approach sought to affirm Yakama children by demonstrating that others care about their education and by providing access to literature that reflects their cultural identity—thereby supporting their confidence and belonging in academic contexts. From an ethical standpoint, the project was structured to avoid positioning the Yakama community as passive recipients. The student consistently emphasized a message of partnership, articulating the initiative as: "We are partnering with you." This framing underscored mutual respect and reciprocity, rather than one-sided assistance. An important takeaway is that empowerment can be constrained by the scale and scope of a project. Nevertheless, even within the relatively modest parameters of this effort, the student made conscious choices—such as including culturally relevant materials, facilitating knowledge-sharing, and prioritizing community agency—that contributed to empowerment rather than dependency. By centering the community's voice and control, the project supported the development of local capacity in a respectful and sustainable manner. Moreover, the project illustrates how youth, even with limited resources, can meaningfully contribute to Indigenous empowerment when guided by humility, intentionality, and a commitment to shared authority.

Teaching: The case study revealed rich opportunities for educational exchange, in which the student played a dual role as both teacher and learner. On one hand, the student took on a teaching role by informing non-Indigenous supporters about the needs of the Yakama Nation, thereby helping to raise awareness and broaden understanding. On the other hand, the student and his team engaged in reciprocal learning through interactions with Yakama community members. As the book drives gained visibility, many of the student's peers became curious about the project and sought to learn more. In response, the student initiated conversations with them to explain the goals of the initiative and encourage further donations. These discussions often included explanations of the Yakama Nation's history and the importance of cultural representation in education. Through these dialogues, the student helped foster a broader understanding that Indigenous communities have distinct educational needs—needs that thoughtful use of books and technology can help address. Some of the student's peers noted that they had previously been unaware of the contemporary challenges faced by the Yakama Nation, while others began drawing parallels to the experiences of other Indigenous groups. Regardless of prior knowledge, most expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn—an outward ripple effect of the student's informal teaching efforts. This two-way learning dynamic not only enriched the project itself but also exemplified how youth-led initiatives can serve as platforms for peer education and cross-cultural understanding.

Accessibility: For the project to be truly effective, several dimensions of accessibility had to be addressed. The first was physical accessibility: the Yakama Nation is geographically distant from the ally's home community, requiring careful planning around the logistics of transporting books and computer equipment. The students coordinated with church representatives to identify a delivery time that would be convenient and workable for all involved. The second consideration was content accessibility—ensuring that the donated materials were both appropriate for Yakama students' reading levels and relevant to their lived experiences. Drawing from their own childhood reading preferences and engaging in dialogue with church leaders, the student curated a selection of books that would be culturally and academically meaningful for the intended audience. Special care was taken to exclude books containing racist or stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous peoples; for example, some older classics with outdated representations were respectfully set aside and not included in the donation. Following the delivery, and continuing into the subsequent period, the student and his team remained in regular contact with church leaders to receive updates about the mobile library's impact and to explore additional ways they could provide ongoing support. This sustained communication underscored a commitment to long-term accessibility—not just in terms of resources, but also in relationships and responsiveness to evolving community needs.

Acknowledgement: Throughout the project, intentional efforts were made to honor and acknowledge the Yakama Nation's sovereignty, identity, and contributions. In all public-facing communications, the initiative was framed not as an act of charity, but as a partnership grounded in mutual respect. The student ensured that the Yakama Nation's name and identity were prominently represented—for example, the project was officially named the Yakama Empowerment Project, and promotional materials included contextual information about the tribe's history and present-day presence. This visible recognition served to counter erasure and helped donors understand that the beneficiaries were not an abstract or anonymous group, but real, contemporary individuals and communities. During the visit to Sacred Road Church, the students formally expressed gratitude to the church leaders for welcoming them onto Yakama land, thereby offering both a land and people acknowledgement. The student ally also acknowledged that the idea for the book drive originated from conversations with Yakama community members, crediting their initiative in articulating the need for educational resources. During the visit, the student team presented a formal letter of appreciation to the Yakama school, thanking them for their collaboration and explicitly recognizing the broader historical context—noting, for instance, the legacy of educational policies aimed at erasing Indigenous cultures, and expressing appreciation for being able to contribute to an initiative that instead supports education rooted in cultural affirmation. Such acknowledgements addressed both historical injustice and current aspirations for decolonizing education. They set a respectful tone that was noticed by community members; one elder remarked that it was meaningful to hear young non-Native individuals express recognition of these deeper truths. In this way, the student demonstrated an understanding that participation in the project was not merely a service rendered, but a privilege and a learning opportunity—an act of allyship grounded in humility, not heroism.

Through the Yakama Empowerment Project, the student's experience reinforced the understanding that allyship is not a one-time gesture, but an ongoing and evolving practice. Following the donation, they continued their involvement through tutoring and advocacy efforts in support of Indigenous education across other platforms and settings. The case also highlights meaningful opportunities for growth. For instance, future projects could more deliberately involve Yakama youth in the planning and decision-making process, thereby amplifying Indigenous student voices and further strengthening both engagement and empowerment. Additionally, the project prompts critical reflection on the nature of charitable frameworks. Rather than perpetuating one-directional models of giving, future initiatives could embrace solidarity-based approaches—for example, by co-organizing fundraisers in which Yakama youth take the lead in mobilizing resources for their schools, while allies provide logistical and relational support. Such a shift would center Indigenous agency, repositioning allies as co-strategists rather than benefactors. These reflections contribute to the broader conversation about how youth-led initiatives can more deeply integrate Indigenous perspectives, values, and sovereignty. Ultimately, they serve as a reminder that meaningful allyship is sustained through relationships, accountability, and the courage to reimagine systems in more just and equitable ways.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Yakama book donation project demonstrates that even a relatively modest, high school student-led initiative can meaningfully reflect the principles of Indigenous allyship when approached with intentionality, humility, and care. While the project focused on physical books rather than digital tools, its design and execution embody values that are equally critical to ethical engagement in technological contexts.

The six components of allyship were not followed as a prescriptive checklist; however, in retrospect, they were clearly embedded in the project's ethos: learning with humility (Exposure), collaborative planning and partnership (Engagement), strengthening community capacity (Empowerment), reciprocal learning (Teaching), inclusive and culturally relevant access (Accessibility), and honoring sovereignty and contribution (Acknowledgement). This holistic alignment helped ensure that the project was not perceived as paternalistic but rather as respectful and genuinely collaborative. Yakama participants affirmed that the effort felt grounded in listening, trust, and shared purpose.

This case study also shows that high school students—often overlooked in discussions of social change—can play a substantive role in advancing equity when given the opportunity to lead with accountability. Through simple acts of coordination, listening, and relationship-building, student allies can support Indigenous self-determination while gaining critical ethical awareness. The project underscores that allyship is not about directing change, but about walking alongside communities and being responsive to their self-identified goals. Ultimately, this project serves as a hopeful reminder that allyship is not about the scale of impact, but the depth of intention. When high school students engage with humility, critical reflection, and an ethic of reciprocity, their efforts can contribute meaningfully to dismantling educational inequities and imagining more inclusive futures. The Yakama Empowerment Project illustrates that such allyship, when grounded in care and carried forward with continuity, can offer real-world alternatives to dominant paradigms—where Indigenous communities are not only supported, but recognized as co-authors of collective progress.

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