The Future of Land-Grab Universities

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The Land-Grab Universities (LGU) project compellingly conveys how nearly eleven million acres of land were stolen from almost 250 tribes, bands, and communities to establish land-grant universities.1 In their work identifying nearly all tracts covered under the Morrill Land Grant Acts, the LGU team connected Indigenous nations with their tracts and calculated the financial benefits land-grant institutions reaped from sales of these lands. Placing the Morrill Act into the context of widespread fraudulent and coercive land-seizure practices in the mid- to late 1800s, LGU successfully illustrates how the existence of contemporary land-grant universities is predicated on extractive legal practices backed by threats of government violence.

Students, faculty, and staff at land-grants occupy the shadows of these violent, genocidal processes that forcibly expropriated lands from Indigenous peoples and communities. A critical piece of investigative journalism, LGU raises awareness of how land-grant universities not only exist upon Indigenous lands but also have been built with Indigenous lands.2 Through interactive visualizations that allow users to search by state, institution, and tribal community, readers learn how the Morrill Act provided a financial foundation for contemporary land-grant universities. Supported by an extensive bibliography and links to media coverage of the project, the visualizations provide information on endowments, enrollment (including Indigenous student enrollment), and profits generated from the Morrill Acts. LGU depicts tracts expropriated, grantees, and the total financial gains generated through those lands. Users learn, for example, about the impact of the 1851 Dakota cession, which reassigned nearly 830,000 acres to endow thirty-five different universities, linking one out of every 13 acres redistributed under Morrill to the United States' dispossession of Dakota people across Mní Sota Makoče.

The striking numbers revealed in LGU's financial analysis make this project a critical intervention into conversations about land dispossession and higher education. Future projects could extend this work even further: U.S. Department of Commerce economist William Larson estimated in 2015 that the 1.89 billion acres of land that make up the United States of America were worth $23 trillion. Splitting the United States into census tracts, parcels, and counties, Larson identified "land" price and value estimates that included "ecosystems (e.g. root systems such as alfalfa), basic siting improvements (e.g. fencing, irrigation, and land clearing), and stocks of natural resources that convey with the land (e.g. timber, water, hunting, and fishing rights)."3 LGU accounts for land price for all institutions, while some valuations included mineral rights and surface rights.4 Yet land valuation is more complex, as institutions' longitudinal financial benefits from land accrue over time. For example, institutions cleared their lands, selling off timber or using the resources to build. The estimated value of those resources along with others like hunting rights, mineral rights, and access to water increases calculations of institutions' financial gains, as would calculations of tax benefits and other financial incentives. This more complex understanding of land valuation further illuminates the ways settler colonialism is extractive—not simply predicated on landownership and the sale of land but on its utility for continually generating profit over time.

This is the author's version of the work published in final edited form as:

We might push those wishing to build on LGU’s argument to take a more expansive view of the value of land, one that would consider relations between humans and more-than-human relatives to understand land’s importance. LGU’s reliance on private property values alone, without drawing attention to the importance of Indigenous relationships with land, risks confirming settler logics of capitalist valuation that undergird the imagined right of colonization on terra nullius. Depicting value and land impact only in terms of capital reinforces settler notions of land as an extractable commodity. Instead, an approach that engages nonquantitative analyses of the impact of Morrill Act transfers could help users revise their understanding of land as a capitalist deliverable. What if, for example, LGU offered users a chance to think through a different relationship to land that engages with Indigenous ways of knowing that rely on active maintenance of relationship to the land through responsible stewardship? This would raise additional questions about the extent of loss, as well as potential remedies, as these transfers fundamentally restructured access to lands and waters that had long been sites of physical, social, emotional, and spiritual sustenance for Indigenous people.

Qualitatively assessing the value of Indigenous lands through rights of access, use, and caretaking fundamentally represents Indigenous relationships to land as one of lived experiences and relationships in situ, narratives that might have come through in the project’s "stories" section. This section currently serves as a repository of media related to the investigation, but a future version of LGU or a related project might offer narratives from Indigenous peoples and nations about the lands currently occupied by institutions of higher education. Such a section might provide historical analyses of the impact of land transfers for communities impacted by them, as well as individual narratives of contemporary Indigenous peoples.

Now is the time for us to engage in such conversations on our campuses. By rigorously documenting the Morrill Act, LGU accurately represents how certain universities benefited from extractive practices, offering land-grant institutions the opportunity to consider how their own history emerges and continues to profit from Indigenous dispossession and violence. As universities grapple with their relationship to enslavement, from direct participation in chattel slavery to endowment funds donated by plantation owners in the United States and the Caribbean, they could take LGU’s Morrill Act analysis as a starting place to address their active and indirect contributions to Indigenous genocide and ongoing dispossession.

But the Morrill Act was not alone in this systematic transfer of Indigenous lands to finance higher education. Taking a broader view, future projects could provide a more nuanced view of the mutually constitutive relationship between public lands and the educational project. The establishment of "public domain" lands and the sale of former tribal lands to individual settler colonizers as part of the process of state formation and for the half-century thereafter facilitated a process similar to Morrill by providing lands to educational institutions. It would therefore be useful for future inquiries to highlight precursors to the Morrill Act that facilitated the same process of financial transfer and dispossession. Accounting for these processes, the view of the financial ties in Ohio, for example, would shift dramatically by including lands tied to the Northwest Ordinances of 1785 and 1787, as well as state-level grants. Users currently see only The Ohio State University as a beneficiary of dispossession; yet by incorporating lands set aside by the Northwest Ordinance and state legislatures, more institutions would be included. The Northwest Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 allocated almost a million acres of land in Ohio with the provision that a township would be set aside for the purposes of establishing an institution of higher learning. The Ohio University, Miami University, and Western Reserve College (now
Case Western University) were all founded through Northwest Ordinance grants. More than two dozen other institutions were chartered in Ohio through the transfer of Indigenous lands to colleges and universities through actions taken by the Ohio General Assembly. Many of these institutions were absorbed or combined into contemporary institutions. This was a common process in the nineteenth century as many states and even cities established institutions of higher education. Expanding the work of LGU to incorporate these precursor laws and grants would reveal an even vaster landscape linking all U.S. educational institutions to dispossession.

A further area of methodological expansion lies in explorations of the role of tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) within the land-grant ecosystem.9 While the Morrill Acts provided land endowments, the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act (EELGSA) of 1994 conferred land-grant status on tribal colleges without providing land endowments. The act also failed to offer TCUs funding for agricultural research from the 1887 Hatch Act or the 1914 Smith-Lever Act or aid from the Second Morrill Act of 1890. Instead, twenty-nine TCUs received endowment income from federal appropriations totaling $23 million, and each college was granted $50,000 per year for agricultural instruction. From 1996 to 2000, TCUs were further able to compete for $1.7 million in grants to fund capital improvements, and states were able to compete for $5 million per year for agricultural extension at TCUs. These actions effectively deprived TCUs of the financial foundation that supported Morrill institutions, replacing it with a competitive grant-driven metric that limited the overall amount of funding available to support all TCUs.10 Where Morrill provided sustained funding, EELGSA created a pool of resources that was not annually guaranteed, was limited in temporal scope, and would not appreciate over time in the same way as land parcels would.

While LGU mentions TCUs in its methodological exposition, by not including them in the individual universities page, LGU leads users away from considerations of TCUs as part of the land-grant system. In turn, this limits our possibilities for thinking about solutions that could remediate the inequities of land-grant universities. The Morrill Act extracted wealth from tribal lands, with the EELGSA serving as an insufficient panacea.11 The value of LGU can be more fully realized through the incorporation of TCUs and further exploration of how to envision a more redistributive model of public higher education.

Scholars, students, and community partners have called for institutions to recognize how they have benefited from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and take active steps to counteract such harms. Megan Red Shirt-Shaw (Oglala Sioux) has called for colleges and institutions, particularly those that benefited from the 1862 Morrill Act, to repatriate Indigenous lands held as part of the original land grant or offer full-tuition scholarships to Indigenous students learning on their homelands.12 Such actions are feasible and, in fact, already being taken—Red Shirt-Shaw notes institutions already providing free tuition to Native students, and Christine Sleeter has documented the growing movement by individuals to return stolen lands.13

As LGU offers opportunities for community and institutional research that would amend and expand the LGU dataset through site-specific studies, the pedagogical possibilities of LGU are rich. We have placed LGU in conversation with other projects like Native Lands (native-land.ca) for the purposes of our own teaching. Additional opportunities for expansion and application of the project include students at land grants working with faculty to add their institution to the LGU dataset, provide supporting documentation, and craft data-driven narratives of how their own institutions have benefited from these types of land grants. Faculty outside of land-grant institutions could also work with their students
to map the relationship between dispossession and their own institutions of higher education. Tribal historic preservation officers, tribal archivists, and Native writers could craft narratives to share how dispossession impacted their communities, stories that might be shared virtually through a hub like LGU. Institutions of higher education could commit to hiring Indigenous faculty and staff to meaningfully shape conversations about admissions, reparations, and other social justice actions in light of histories of dispossession. And, as important, descendants of those originally dispossessed should be asked to sit on (and be compensated for service on) boards of trustees, advisory boards, and other governance bodies.

We commend LGU creators for their painstaking documentation and dataset creation. We welcome its role in highlighting how institutions of higher education benefit from Indigenous dispossession. Future projects that build upon LGU will undoubtedly shape institutions’ thinking about their responsibilities to engage in forms of restorative action to reckon with both historic and ongoing extraction and exploitation, repatriate Indigenous lands, and fully support Indigenous students.
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Notes


5. As the LGU team note in their methodological explanation, they have not systematically investigated "short-lived" beneficiaries nor those that reassigned their grants to other public institutions, so future work should explore the benefits of the Morrill process for these institutions, including prominent universities like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Yale, and Brown.


