UC Berkeley’s 2nd annual Indigenous People’s Day recognizes Native American history and culture

UC Berkeley students and faculty gathered Monday to celebrate Indigenous People’s Day, a daylong event focused on the culture, dance and history of native people.

A collaboration between the UC Berkeley department of theater, dance and performance studies and the American Indian Graduate Student Association, the celebration of Indigenous People’s Day featured speakers and performers at the Bancroft Dance Studio, on the corner of Bancroft Avenue and Dana Street. Performing-arts students made up the bulk of the audience members for many of the presentations, which included a talk by graduate student Peter Nelson on the study of archaeology and anthropology’s effect on native cultures. Edwardo Madril, a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe and a professional dancer, performed the hoop dance and other traditional Native American dances.

"It’s not magical; it’s not mystical. It may be profound — I don’t know," Madril said. "The image of an American Indian has been around for a couple hundred years, but we still seem to be a spectacle."

Indigenous People’s Day is a movement to counter Columbus Day, the federal holiday falling on the second Monday of October each year that celebrates Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the Americas in 1492. According to Timothy Molino, a UC Berkeley graduate student in the department of ethnic studies and a member of the American Indian Graduate Student Association, Columbus Day fails to acknowledge the flourishing Native American culture that exists today.

"Rather than Columbus Day, this is a movement to recognize indigenous people," Molino said. "It’s about recognizing these cultures rather than the defeat of these cultures."

Indigenous People’s Day celebrated its second year on campus. The event was prompted when a UC Berkeley production resulted in outcry from the Native American community in the spring of 2012. The play, "Ishi: The Last of the Yahi," elicited negative reactions from the American Indian Graduate
Student Association and other groups for what some claimed to be an inaccurate and harmful depiction of Native American culture.

Lisa Wymore, a UC Berkeley associate professor of dance whose students took part in the event, said the department decided to start Indigenous People's Day as a way to address the tension left over from the production.

The program received funding from the Office of Vice Chancellor of Equity and Inclusion Gibor Basri, the American Indian Graduate Program and the department of ethnic studies, according to Olivia Chilcote, chair of the American Indian Graduate Student Association.

“This day is about sharing culture, but it’s also about remembering history,” Chilcote said. “It would be really great if UC Berkeley were to make this a campuswide event.”

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