

# A step to rebuild relationships: U hires director of tribal relations

Tadd Johnson is an ambassador between local tribes and the University of Minnesota.

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The University of Minnesota appointed the first-ever senior director of American Indian Tribal Nations Relations late last month to help build relationships between local tribes and the University.

Tadd Johnson, a member of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, has a busy road ahead of him — serving as an ambassador between the 11 tribal nations in Minnesota and the University while also supporting Indigenous faculty and students on all five University campuses.

### An emerging role

Because Johnson is tasked with implementing the new role himself, he is unsure what exactly his position will look like.

To develop meaningful connections with tribes, there is much consultation and relationship building that must be done first, Johnson said. He plans to spend weeks, even months, getting to know members of tribal nations, finding out about and listening to issues impacting their communities.

Cori Bazemore-James, a director in the Graduate School Diversity Office who led the search committee for the position, said Johnson already has respectful relationships and trust built with local tribes, something necessary for this role.

One thing some Indigenous students are hoping for with Johnson's role is more accessibility to resources and University administration.

“We want to see more transparency in recruitment, attracting and retaining Indigenous students,” said Charles Golding, vice president of the American Indian Student Cultural Center.

This fall, there are around 400 students who self-reported as American Indian, according to the University's Office of Institutional Research. This number has stayed fairly consistent over the past decade.

Golding, who also served on the search committee for the position, said he thinks Johnson is a good pick for the role because he will stand up to the institution on behalf of tribal nations.

### A difficult history

The University has struggled to maintain a strong relationship with local tribes, as previous administration was not committed to building relationships in a culturally sensitive way, respecting tribal sovereignty and needs, advocates say.

Despite these tensions, some members of the University community are working collaboratively with tribes. A group of researchers is exploring ways to preserve a declining wild rice population in partnership with local tribes.

Community members say things appear to be changing for the better under President Joan Gabel's administration. Johnson said a necessary step in this process is for the University to apologize.

"The University screws up all the time," Johnson said. "They don't understand tribes. It is time to admit the University is not innocent. It is time to partner with tribes and repair these relationships."

### Building meaningful relationships

Johnson himself acknowledges that he is just one person, and that it will take a willingness and commitment from the University to make change.

"Hiring him alone doesn't change it. It is facilitating further actions that need to be taken to improve relationships," said Karen Diver, former chairwoman of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

She said it now depends on how effective the University lets Johnson be and that he does not allow himself to be tokenized.

"If they listen and take to heart ... and really take all this seriously, it can be a real meaningful impact for both the University system and tribal communities," Diver said.

### A new concept

Having this ambassador role is a relatively new concept, although the University is not the first to have this position.

Johnson's new role is within the University's Office for Equity and Diversity. Vice President Michael Goh hired Johnson and said he will support him.

Goh said in his administrative role, he has an opportunity to address some of the issues with local tribes that the University has previously failed to address.

“It takes a person like professor Tadd Johnson, with the experience, with skills, with the relationships and trust he has with tribal nations to be the one to enact it,” he said.

Along with his new role, Johnson is continuing to serve as director of the Tribal Sovereignty Institute and director of graduate studies in the American Indian Studies Department in Duluth.

He previously served as a tribal lawyer for over 20 years. In 1997, Johnson was appointed chair of the National Indian Gaming Commission by then-President Bill Clinton.

“I think that it shows a huge step forward on the University’s behalf, that the University is taking these relationships with tribes seriously,” Bazemore-James said.

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