

Jillian Morris-Statement of Purpose- MPA Admissions-Tribal Governance cohort 2024

If someone had asked me in high school where I thought I would be at 32, applying to a master's program would not have been in my vocabulary. To be fair, it is something I am still wrapping my head around, as a first gen-student the world of academia has felt like a foreign place. I remember at 27 when I decided to go back to school, I spent an entire day from office-to-office at Clark Community College. Registration to advising to financial aid, back to advising, etc. After I walked out the doors, a day spent scaling walls I didn't know existed, I sobbed in my car. The tears were a mixture of relief, joy, and fear.

In my second year at Clark, I took a Woman's Studies class. I was introduced to a speech by Adrienne Rich, called "Claiming an Education." Then it registered that I deserved to be there, and I was claiming my right to be there. Not only as a first gen, non-traditional, female student, but as an Indigenous woman who would not have previously had access to the rooms where these conversations are held. It had become something larger than me, and success was not defined by getting to the next degree, career, or tax bracket. It became questions like, was I laying down a path for those who may come after me? Am I ending generational cycles of limiting beliefs?

In our final semester at WSUV, we chose an internship that prepares us for the work we wanted to be doing after graduation. I wasn't sure where I fit into the bigger picture with the work I wanted to do, and the fear of not finding a job after graduation loomed over me. I knew that I wanted to be in a role of advocacy, and I was certain that I wanted to work with Elders and aging populations. A professor suggested an ombudsman, which I had never heard of. I went through the informational interview process with an ombudsman from the state, but the training classes did not align with my required internship hours. This was the closest I'd felt to the advocacy work I wanted to do, and I was disappointed. After our meeting, I was poking around the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) website, and I found Tribal Affairs within the Aging and Long-term support administration

(ALTSA). I found the name of a Tribal Affairs Administrator, again, claiming my education, I sent the email. I let her know who I was, what I was passionate about and inquired about internship possibilities. I became the first Tribal Affairs intern within ALTSA at DSHS. I will never forget my first meeting with the state, it was in January, and it was the IPAC (Indian Policy Advisory Committee) meeting. A Tribal member from Jamestown S'Klallam opened the meeting with a song, and a prayer in her language. It was powerful, I had never seen what a government-to-government partnership looked like in practice.

After I finished my bachelor's, I extended my internship and my administrator retired. Her goal was to leave an entirely indigenous Tribal Affairs unit, and when my current administrator stepped into her role, that was coming to fruition. Given that we were a unit of two at that point, an administrator and an intern, there were 3 positions to fill, and I wanted one of those positions. At the time, I was working on developing a culturally relevant respite training program for Tribes, organizing and hosting Savvy Caregiver in Indian Country Trainings, and observing round tables, consultations, and meetings with Tribal nations. I could see the work being done, and the work that still needed to be done. However, there's no intern to executive pipeline in the state and my first attempt at applying for one of the roles in Tribal Affairs, I tanked. Again, I was met with walls that I didn't know were there, nor did I know how to climb them. Fortunately, my administrator believed in me and more than that, she advocated for me. On my second try, I got the job.

I will say, I interview terribly, my public speaking has room for improvement. I am better at writing out my thoughts so that's what I did. DSHS sends you the questions 24 hours in advance, and I wrote out my responses. This wasn't just for nerves, I didn't want to mince words, I didn't want to misrepresent myself because I knew then, what I know now, this is where I'm meant to be. I was hired into my current role in September 2022, now in the throes of year two, I recognize that I have grown. It's not been without struggle, doubts, impostor syndrome that was crippling at times, but I remind myself,

this system was not built for me. It's not built for Indigenous people, it was built to erase us, and any time I leave a meeting where I am the only Native in the room, I am reminded this is why I am here.

When I look at the bigger picture it's not just about my story, every step of my journey has required me to ask for help, to look to other people for strength, advocacy, and guidance. Whether it's inter-tribal, government-to-government, nation to nation, there are people who believe that they can change the world and the ones that do know that we are stronger when we work together. This year I have seen firsthand, people who have made it their life's work to ensure that we have a future as Tribal peoples, I know that my job is to leave the space for those who come after me. In turn, I have become less afraid of failure and more afraid of what if I never tried?