

INDIGENOUS SUCCESS WITH OLIVIA BENTLEY MASTER

Voiceover

Welcome to “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”, with Dr Katelyn Barney and Professor Tracey Bunda.

Dr Barney

Hi, I’m Katelyn, and welcome to our podcast series, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”. We’d like to start the podcast by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we’re recording this today, and pay our respects to their ancestors and their descendants who continue to have strong spiritual and cultural connections to Country. We’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where you are listening from today and pay our respects to them as well.

The podcast series focuses on what works in outreach programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students. This series is a part of a suite of resources developed from an Equity Fellowship that I undertook that was funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education in 2020, and it focuses on success factors that are based on key findings from the Fellowship. Each episode is an interview with an Indigenous staff member or university student about aspects of effective outreach programs. I’m a non-Indigenous woman born and raised on Jagera and Turrbal Country and I’m joined by my co-host and colleague, Professor Tracey Bunda who is part of the Indigenous advisory group on the Fellowship.

Dr Bunda

Thanks Katelyn. My name is Tracey Bunda as Katelyn said. I’m the head of the academic programs at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies unit at UQ but moreover, I am a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman and I too pay my respects to the traditional owners of Country where Katelyn and I are recording today, also to pay respects to the traditional owners and ancestors of the Countries of people who are listening in to the podcast. As Katelyn said, the podcast series is called, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”, and there are multiple understandings of “success”. It’s a bit tricky to be able to nail down “success” and what it means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When I was thinking about this Katelyn, I was thinking from my own experience, you know, from my life experience, I draw upon that. I also draw upon my cultural experience and the leadership that I saw around me within my family and community and how that informed “success” and how both those things then influence the type of leaders that we want to be in our practice, both for the present and in the future; it doesn’t mean it’s necessarily fixed because our experiences are changing all the time.

For those of you who are listening to the podcast, you’ll hear Katelyn and I interchange between saying “Indigenous”, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander”, and we’ll also say “First Nations” sometimes. I know that’s all a bit controversial to use the word “Indigenous” but we do use it where we are located – just to confirm that we will be interchanging between those sort of namings.

Dr Barney

And we also want to just note that we hope the podcast's useful for outreach practitioners generally who are working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students but also we hope it's of interest to people in higher education with an interest in student success and student equity generally as well.

Today we're focusing on the key role of student ambassadors in outreach programs for Indigenous students and our guest is Olivia Williams who's an honours student at the University of Melbourne. Welcome, Olivia.

Olivia Williams

Thank you. Thank you for having me. So, yuwin ngadhi Olivia, dyiradmadilinya badhu Koori. My mob come from Lithgow, Wiradjuri Country. I was born and raised on Biripi Country in the mid-north coast of New South Wales, and I now live and study in Melbourne on Bunurong and Wurundjeri Country.

Dr Bunda

One of the things that I wanted to ask – you said that you're an honours student; what was your pathway into university?

Olivia Williams

I finished Year 12 in 2015. My school didn't offer much support for those wanting to study interstate and I also didn't receive much encouragement from my school for studying interstate – there was doubts about my financial ability to do that. My sister though had studied at the University of Melbourne before me and she played a key role in encouraging me to study arts at the University of Melbourne. Also, my mum was really proactive in learning the VTAC application system. She didn't go to university herself but she was really invested in my success. To be honest, conversations about university often ended in tears; the pressure of studying for your HSC and looking towards university was a lot at times, and my school only offered a skeleton structure of the HSC range of subjects, so I didn't know what studying anthropology or criminology or psychology would mean. When I'm trying to apply for things, there was all these big conversations and trying to study for your final exams was overwhelming. Nonetheless, I persevered, or more my mum persevered in making me persevere and I applied, and I was successful in my application to the University of Melbourne but I deferred my place for a year before commencing study in 2016.

Dr Bunda

Okay. So all power to mums, particularly because they've studied the VTAC form; she deserves the degree, Olivia, for studying those forms alone.

Olivia Williams

Absolutely.

Dr Bunda

So, when you did get into your BA program – and I think the other interesting thing before I go on, is the way in which you've come in to that particular university because you had family breaking ground...

Dr Barney

Yes, that's right, her sister.

Dr Bunda

Yeah, in front of you. That makes it a little bit easier as well.

Olivia Williams

Yeah, it absolutely felt like that. My sister had participated in programs in science so she knew she wanted to do science, but she would always bring me down to Melbourne and introduce me to people at the university and she definitely had a foot in the door for me to follow behind.

Dr Bunda

When you did get into the BA program, did you major in any particular studies there, Olivia?

Olivia Williams

Majored in Sociology and Australian Indigenous Studies.

Dr Bunda

Okay. And then you're taking that on into your honours program?

Olivia Williams

That's correct.

Dr Bunda

And so what's your focus in your honours program, could I ask?

Olivia Williams

Yeah, I mean it's Week 9, so it's all still falling into place but it's something around Australian National Identity and Australian Rules Football and the way in which Aboriginality is either included on the field or relegated to the bench. You know, it's like we can have athletic Aboriginal bodies on the Australian football pitch, but we can't have displays of Aboriginality that aren't accounted for. So, you know, Nicky Winmar pointing at his skin is a threat in the same way that Adam Goodes doing a war dance is a threat, but if we know, at Dreamtime at the G there's going to be a dance and it's permitted and there's notice, we know what's going to happen – that sort of display of Aboriginality is deemed as "okay".

Dr Bunda

Hell no to displays of warriorship.

Olivia Williams

Mm-hm. Yeah, no spontaneous, we don't know it's going to happen – you can't be Aboriginal on a football field; you just need to be a footballer.

Dr Bunda

Well, you can't be scary warrior – those sorts of presentations, but a nice, passive dance to open the Dreamtime at the G – that's a different sort of story.

Olivia Williams

Mm-hm.

Dr Barney

So, Olivia, you participated in some outreach programs while you were at school. Could you tell us a bit about your experience as a school student – a bit about that?

Olivia Williams

Yeah, I participated in two programs – one at Sydney University and one at Trinity College, Melbourne. The one at Sydney University was only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, whereas the one at Trinity College, Melbourne was mainstream. Coming from a regional town, there's novelty in going to the city by yourself, you know, without your family. This is a big opportunity to be pushed out of your comfort zone as a young person. Now, and in school, I love socialising so the highlight of those programs was always around the dinner table and the fun activities that they put on, but they were also a good opportunity to get exposure to university, you know, what it even looks like, and you can start to imagine yourself in these big buildings and doing this sort of work.

Dr Bunda

Was there a difference, Olivia, for you? One was specifically for the mob, and then you were saying one's mainstream, white-stream, so was there a difference there?

Olivia Williams

I think so. Now I look back, the connections I've maintained have only been from the black fella camp; the other one, I don't think I was as present at – it was a young leaders' program and all these school captains and all the people who had done different leadership programs, and were really high achievers – I don't think I got as much out of that program in terms of connecting with other people.

Dr Bunda

That's an interesting point I think. You know, when you go with mob, there's a sort of sense of safety and comfort, huh?

Olivia Williams

Yes.

Dr Bunda

What interested you in becoming an ambassador for those outreach camp programs?

Olivia Williams

I've only ever been an ambassador on programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and I wanted to be part of it because I thought it was important that prospective students see people like them already doing the thing they're aspiring to do. It didn't make sense to me to be having outreach programs run by non-Indigenous people because it implies that black fellas aren't at the university, so it's a bit of a stretch for students then to promise them all these things and "It's going to be great, and it's going to be this" if they're not resonating with the story of those who are leading them throughout this experience. So that's what really drew me to it; I just wanted to connect with young people and connect with their stories and for them to see similarities so that they can see it really is a possibility.

Dr Bunda

And that sense of giving back to the community as well – I mean, there's a sense that you were mirroring what your sister had done for you.

Dr Barney

And have you maintained some of those connections you've made with students, you know, when you were an ambassador with school students – have you maintained some of those networks and connections?

Olivia Williams

Yes, it's special now some of the students who were participants on the programs I mentored on are now coming through the university, special being their peer and you know, although I'm no longer in that formal ambassador role, you still maintain it because that's how they've known you and they're still going to come to you for advice and they resonated with part of your story. So that's really special but then also hearing where their peers ended up and then you see them at events, community events – you'll be at the NAIDOC event or Indigenous nationals or something and you see these students again. Yeah, it's special.

Dr Bunda

Olivia, when you are with the students, with the students who are on the programs where you were an ambassador, what kinds of things are they looking for from you? Can you just give us a little bit of an understanding of the mentoring that you're doing in that?

Olivia Williams

I think they just want reassurance. It's just a lot of self-doubt from themselves, or from their schools and their peers that are putting on them that... it was the same for me – I mentioned it before, you know, there was doubt that I would financially be able to come interstate, all the way to Melbourne and was coached to not be following such a pathway, and they're just looking for the same reassurance that they can do it, not only financially, but also that there's a community here, that there's support here, that although you'll be moving away from home, there's ways you can get home and ways you can stay in contact with home, so they're asking those sorts of questions of "I don't want to move away from my family. What's it going to be like? How are all these changes going to work? I'm going to be the first one in my university", and it's that reassurance of "I'm going to be the first one in my family to go to university", and it's that reassurance that other people share your story and there is support here and it has been done, and it can be done by them too. Of course they ask questions too about the logistics of study, you know, "I want to do this. How do I end up doing this? I want to go be a nurse in my community. What does that look like? How do I do that? Where do I have to go? How long is it going to take me?"

They just want to ask those questions about themselves and how they can make their aspirations come true.

Dr Bunda

Yeah, deadly.

Dr Barney

Do you usually stay on campus with those students when you do... is that how it works?

Olivia Williams

Yes. Usually they'll be hosted at a college, like a residential college, and I'll be sleeping in the room next to them.

Dr Bunda

And it will be go, go, go from sun up to sun down.

Olivia Williams

Yes, it's washing shirts, it's get up for breakfast, it's "Where's your bus pass? Where's this? Where's that? Get a water bottle, get a hat".

Dr Bunda

You don't get much sleep, huh? This podcast is talking about "Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it" – what do you think "Indigenous Success" means?

Olivia Williams

I think we're becoming more comfortable with the idea that "success" is about doing your personal best; it's not synonymous with, you know, how much money you have, or your education level, or the number of friends you have, and I think as we grow as individuals, we move past these rigid definitions anyway but for me, "Indigenous Success" is about [Gary Ella? 0:13:25], "Speak Truth". It's about speaking your truth, knowing your truth, and living in accordance with that truth. It makes my heart soar, seeing mob not following their truth – of course we have to try things and sometimes we wander away from our journey, but ultimately there are certain things that keep calling us back, that inspire us and resonate with our spirits. I've seen mob come here to university, interested in studying at uni, only to find that their passion lies somewhere else like hospitality, or aged care, or community work – rather than force themselves to stay at uni, these people accept their truth and act accordingly. And to me, this is "success" in the same way that someone who comes in here and says, "I want to be a lawyer" and goes on to do the juris doctorate is also a successful person.

Dr Barney

So, overall, you know, Olivia, what role do you think that student ambassadors or mentors – sometimes they're also called – have a role to play in terms of supporting Indigenous students to transition to uni? Can you talk a bit about that?

Olivia Williams

I think it's again those things of seeing yourself in the story of someone else. I think you can do all the competency training in the world, and you can read the Koori Mail and love Cathy Freeman, but ultimately, lived experience is hard to beat, so, young people looking up to people in a position that they would like to be, helps them to imagine what that transition would look like and of course, they have the opportunity to ask those questions and receive reassurance about what they're doing and how they can make things possible.

Dr Bunda

Are there any other experiences that you'd like to talk about?

Olivia Williams

I just think from my experience on outreach programs and, you know, observing and participating, that there's two things that people who are leading these programs, or facilitating these programs, should keep in mind, and it's firstly that it's important... of course the academic or whatever the particular focus of the camp might be, it is important to deliver on that, but also recognise if the program's only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, community-building is also important and facilitating opportunities for that is important, so it's things like having yarning circles or sporting activities, or games, or social dinners and things like that, because these are the things that students will also move

forward with is these connections. They're going to cross paths again, whether it's at university or in the workplace, or out and about socially, and it's important that they get time to make those connections.

And secondly, I think it's important not to get bogged down in the academic side of it. Yes, you might be hosting a science camp and science is an important part, but all your ambassadors don't need to be from the science faculty; students, you know, they might be Year 8 students, and they like their science class – they don't know if they're going to go through and study science, so having people who are also doing arts, design, other faculties so that they can talk to those people as well, and have those conversations – just about exposing students to the possibility of university and a number of pathways, not only one pathway.

Dr Bunda

Thanks for this conversation [today? 0:16:27], and we really hope that you go well with your studies and Katelyn and I are old girls so we're going to look out for your young, shining star coming out of Melbourne University in the future. Thank you both.

Olivia Williams

Bless you. Thank you for having me.

Dr Bunda

Katelyn and I both want to thank you for joining this podcast series, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, and being it”. If you've got any questions about this podcast or any of the other podcasts that you may have listened to, please contact, Katelyn on her email address, “k.barney” – that is B-A-R-N-E-Y – k.barney@uw.edu.au Thank you very much, and we hope that you'll join us in the future.

[End of recording]