**Shawn Wilson Interview Transcript  
Global Engagement Speaker Series  
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By Carla Hills

CH: Keep in mind that because we are not academics per se it’s all interesting to us. When you talk…

SW: Use everyday language, OK?

CH: Yes. But you can scholarly it up if you want to. The first question, what academic path did you take that resulted in your work with Indigenous peoples?

SW: It wasn’t an academic path. That’s my life basically, growing up on a reservation. I’ve always worked with Indigenous peoples.

CH: What reservation did you grow up on?

SW: [?], Cree Nation. I was just working with my community and with other communities. I guess it’s more like been a matter of adapting the western knowledge that I learned at the university into being useful in community contexts.

CH: Was there a great emphasis or a push on education in your culture?

SW: My family is totally different than most of the families on our reservation. So for our family it definitely was, because both my parents were professors. So for me going to university, it’s like of course you’re going to university, it’s like you go to kindergarten. So it’s not something you think about. But that’s definitely not the case for any other family on our reservation. So we were kind of weird in that way.

CH: You know I talked to Matthew Fletcher a little bit about this when I interviewed him a few months back. We had talked about his work and…Do you know Matthew Fletcher?

SW: No.

CH: He’s here at MSU. He runs the Indigenous Law and Policy Center at the College of Law. It is a thing that comes up, about how unique it is when there are leaders in different parts of society that originate from a culture. That’s why we ask the question. But how did you come to do this work then, academically? How did that evolve?

SW: I guess it was…like when I was doing my undergraduate degree it was totally like I thought it would be cool to be a medical doctor. It was the way pre-med and science was taught was so far removed from the reality of everyday life. It was so abstract, so…content without context, that it totally didn’t make any sense to me so I just finished off my bachelor’s degree as quick as I could, basically.

But when I did my master’s degree in community psychology, then it was like totally the opposite. Everything was about community and how the knowledge fits into community, and it was really interesting because I did that at University of Alaska Fairbanks and there were also Indigenous faculty members there. It was the first time I had ever seen Indigenous faculty members other than my parents. They had elders on campus, and they valued Indigenous knowledge. So for me that was when I was able to say that I can be both, I can be Indigenous and can be an academic at the same time and be a researcher and an Indigenous person and practice both things at once. So I didn’t have to make the choice of either/or.

CH: This may be a premature question that we can defer and come back to if you want to, but one of the questions we’ve asked all of the previous speakers is how the landscape for higher education has changed. Or, more directly, how has the landscape changed since you started your work.

SW: Hmm. I think it’s changed incredibly. I guess first just the recognition of qualitative research methods changed the way that…well, it started to make people realize their underlying assumptions behind research. Once people started to realize that, then it was easier to say well, as Indigenous people we’ve got a different set of underlying assumptions. That’s changed tremendously. Now I think we’re at a place where…for students, I tell them you don’t have to justify why you’re using Indigenous methodologies. I put it the other way around. If you’re studying Indigenous studies I think you would pretty much have to justify why you *wouldn’t* use Indigenous methodologies. It’s totally shifted now. It’s become substantive theory and so on. Right?

CH: One of the things I’m wondering, will you be discussing what it means to indigenize research or is that a pretty widely accepted practice now?

SW: I don’t know about indigenize.

CH: That’s not the right word?

SW: Yeah. I think we just practice who we are. So it’s not like…We just come from an Indigenous paradigm. We come from that philosophical background. So I think it’s not…Indigenize to me carries a subtle connotation of decolonization. It’s like decolonization is in reaction to colonization. So rather than being in reaction to the other, it’s just a celebration of who we are. That’s just the norm. But most of academia isn’t quite there yet. So maybe there’s indigenizing required in some places. But more than that is required. It’s like you need to get to just doing it.

CH: How do you build an academic team, then? To prepare for working with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous populations? What do you look for? Who do you look for?

SW: It’s easy if you can work with other Indigenous people that already come from that philosophical tradition because then you don’t have to teach them stuff.

CH: In the absence of that, though, let’s say that you are challenged by a lack of cultural contacts in a community and you’re bringing in a research team, you’re working with students, you’re working with postdocs or whatever.

SW: I would look for awareness. It’s almost like before you can start talking with people about race, they have to be aware of white privilege. It’s almost the same thing. If you can look at male privilege and white privilege and socioeconomic privilege and how all of those things interact, then you can think if you apply that same concept of privilege and start thinking about that, that’s how it works with knowledge systems. So certain Western knowledge systems have a privilege in the fact that they don’t even have to be examined. It’s just assumed that you’re coming from that knowledge system. So as long as people can get to that point where they understand that actually, I’m working from this knowledge system, I’ve got to recognize that other people work from a different knowledge system, then they’re at a point where they can start to…

CH: Understand.

SW: Understand, yeah. They’ve got to realize, recognize first.

CH: What about some of the most important lessons that you’ve discovered during your work with Indigenous communities. When we talked to Jessica about how to build the conversation with you, one of the things she said that you’ve conveyed in different things that you’ve written or discussed, is the importance of storytelling, relationships, emotions, understanding past traumas of the culture. Are there certain things that you fundamentally begin with because you’ve learned…

SW: For me it all starts with relationships. It all starts with the process of how you engage with whatever your research topic is, and if it’s working with communities, then how you engage with people. So it’s how you build relationships and how you go about *relating* to things. It’s not just how you build relationships with people, that’s the easiest thing, you can easily look at how someone relates interpersonally, but you can extend that into how you relate with knowledge, how you relate with the environment, how you relate…So I guess it comes down to focusing more on the process and then the product will take care of itself.

CH: One of the things that Jessica had talked about is agreeing what is valued in the research outcomes, that what may initially be discussed is slightly different to the community versus…

SW: That’s what I mean. The process has to come first. You can’t go in with a set outcome that you’ve already got in mind. You have to go in and be guided by the process and then the process will guide you toward outcomes that you can share, share goals with the research people that you’re working with.

CH: With some of the current global challenges, how do you think that affects the work that you do and the attempts to collect research or work with Indigenous populations? Let me rephrase it in a more general way and then we can narrow it. In the current global climate do you seek to go into places where there is current turmoil or do you seek to go into places where there is great need in different capacities…

SW: Hmm. That’s a good question. I think that ideally I wouldn’t seek to go into someplace. I would wait to be invited into someplace. But that doesn’t always necessarily happen.

CH: That’s an interesting statement right there.

SW: It really comes down to do you see research as a knowledge production thing or do you see research as community service. So are you providing a community service. I see myself as providing research as a community service, so it’s like someone wants…Find out what service they want and you provide it for them. If that makes sense.

CH: Yeah. Give me some examples of why people may seek you out.

SW: A lot of times people want things evaluated. So it’s not necessarily the type of research I enjoy doing, evaluation, evaluative research, but it’s oftentimes what they need for funding, say for example, is when evaluation is done. But those are kind of boring.

CH: So what does inspire you?

SW: People wanting to tell their story, I think is really cool. A lot of times you get elders coming and saying I want to tell my story and I want help documenting it or…Not necessarily document, it doesn’t have to be written, but help formatting how they can tell their story in a way that’s gonna be savable and reusable for younger generations. That’s exciting to me. And I guess the sort of stuff I find exciting that you never get invited to communities to do but I find exciting to do is talking about philosophy and what’s your underlying philosophy behind why you’re doing things. To me that’s getting to the basis of what makes us Indigenous people. Makes us different. I’m looking at the beauty of our cultures, because usually when people are looking for research or looking to solve a problem, it’s very rare for people to say look, this thing is so beautiful in our community, can you do some research on it. But to me that would be ideal, is they say look we’ve got this fantastic culture here, can you help us to document it. That to me would be ideal.

CH: Do you think that documenting and preserving culture helps promote better practice of it?

SW: It can as long as people are aware that this is a process, the documentation itself is a process and not making it become a static thing, where we’re not cultural artifacts where you put this artifact up on a shelf and look at it. These are living, breathing practices of culture, so this is our practice. It’s more a matter of documenting practice and how that is evolving and changing and growing and shrinking and it’s moving. It’s a living, breathing culture.

CH: One of the things that you said was really interesting to me. I don’t know, Linda, if you want to expound on it or not, but the one thing was invited in versus trying to do something where you haven’t been invited. That’s an interesting kind of a thing and I’m wondering…Do you have any sorts of things on a list that you would really like to do, that are sort of like on a wish list for later-later-later after I’ve got time to do what I want kind of thing. Do you have anything like that? Anyplace you want to go, anybody you want to sort of partner with that seems like a real interesting…

SW: That’s kind of a loaded question. I think it’s almost like…Really it gets down to why people are doing research and getting an education for that matter, if you’re thinking of education and research as being a way of personal advancement, you’re doing it to make yourself a better person or to get ahead in the world. Then you’re going to go about doing it totally differently than if you think I’m going to university not for myself, but I’m going to university to make life better for my children or my community, and I’m doing research not for myself but I’m doing research to make life better for my community. So it’s more like a matter of what do I see as community…What would help make things better for our community.

CH: Do the academics who are working with Indigenous populations, do they basically start in their own culture?

SW: Well everyone starts in their own culture, yeah. That’s unavoidable. It depends on how open you are to recognizing that it’s your own culture and not everyone is going to share the same beliefs as you, and then being open to say all right, I recognize that’s a cultural value that I’m enacting here…How do you guys do it? It’s being open to change and open to doing things differently.

CH: What advice do you have for faculty who want to work with Indigenous peoples? We’ve sort of touched on that, but in an institution like MSU, that’s bigger, and there are 17 different degree-granting colleges, that’s obviously a lot of territory to cover, to have everybody rowing in the same direction, so to speak. What advice do you have for MSU and those faculty who do want to practice?

SW: I think you have to switch your focus from what’s going to be the outcome of your research to the relationships that you build are the outcome of your research. So the process is not something that you need in order to do research, but the process *is* the research. So you have to build those relationships. You don’t build those relationships so you can do the research; building those relationships *is* the research. You have to put a whole lot more time and effort into relationship building right off the bat. That may be the entire research project, building a relationship with a community. That’s it. To me that’s a really good outcome, if you’ve built up a relationship well enough that people trust you.

CH: That’s cool.

SW: If you can go in and say I’m a geophysicist, and two years from now people understand what a geophysicist is and they trust you, you’ve done a good research project. It doesn’t really matter what other outcomes come out of it. They’re almost secondary. I’m not just saying geophysics in particular, but any old topic.

CH: I know what you mean. I think that we’re done here. I think I’ve exhausted the… I’ve exhausted Linda…Anything that you’d like to add?

SW: To me it’s the same with engagement, right? You’re not doing community engagement as a way to get into the community, your research is the engagement. It’s not a tool for getting somewhere, it is what you’re aiming for.

CH: It’s the way we do it. It’s really nice to meet you and to hear about this. It is very interesting because part of the thing that people are always hesitant to discuss is how to work with communities that are different from themselves. It’s very interesting to learn how to go about doing these things and to hear from people that work in communities all the time and deal with different issues. You probably deal with very sensitive topics sometimes, and stuff that you have to get on the table not all at once.

SW: I was thinking about what advice would I give people too, and another thing is, if once you view the relationship building and the process as the key outcome, it switches how you go about starting into a relationship, because then you’re not going in as a researcher, as I got my degree from here, I’ve studied this that and the other. You’re going in as a person that’s building a relationship so you have to introduce yourself in a totally different way. This is who I am, this is who my family is, this is how I’m connected to this area, and I know a little bit about…geophysics.

CH: That’s right. Jess said that you always introduce yourself and your family, right?

SW: Yeah, and where you’re from.

CH: Where you’re from.

SW: Definitely.

LCJ: That’s where a lot of faculty go wrong.

SW: Yeah, they come in and say I’m the director of this research center and I’ve got this degree…They go and describe their titles rather than describing who they are.

CH: We’re all trained to do that, right? That was the first thing I did when I introduced myself, I talked about doing communications for University Outreach and Engagement. It’s almost…This is different, when you go someplace and people invite you to sit down and they want to get to know you before they decide if they’re gonna deal with you or not. It’s interesting. I know in the United States we’re all taught to be professional.

LCJ: What’s unprofessional about introducing your family?

SW: Yeah, that’s considered totally unprofessional.

CH: Right. It is. When you do go into someplace where there are elders, there is an assessment…That’s the wrong word.

SW: They’re assessing you. Whether or not to trust you, basically, and to say do I want to invest my time and energy in this person. Am I just going to give them the two-word answer, or am I going to try and actually engage with them in a process that’s going to give them a lot deeper understanding of whatever they’re looking at. Because it does…It’s an investment. We have to recognize that we’re investing time and energy in our research, but it’s a shitload of investment of time and energy in the community when they’re engaged with us.