
INDIAN EDUCATION FOR ALL: A Tribal College Perspective

Montana's tribal colleges have the knowledge and expertise to help the state's public schools fulfill the mandate of Indian Education for All. But their resources are limited, and they must find ways to offer their services without stretching themselves too thin.

BY EVERALL FOX

WHEN delegates to Montana's 1972 constitutional convention inserted new language into the constitution regarding the cultural and educational integrity of the state's American Indians, little did they know the impact it would have on education some 34 years later. Bringing that constitutional language to life in Montana's classrooms would be a precarious journey, finally resulting in its codification in the Indian Education for All (IEFA) Act, passed in 1999, and the law's historic funding by the state legislature in 2005.

Adding to all of these events was the election of Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who proposed an increase in funding for IEFA. Gov. Schweitzer's proposal included a unique provision: funding to support Montana's seven tribal colleges in their efforts to write their own tribal histories, called the Tribal Histories Project.

Montana's tribal colleges have always operated in accordance with the tenets of IEFA, and many include in their mission statements the advancement of their tribes' culture and traditions. The current challenge facing tribal colleges is to meet the demands of Montana's education community for accurate and appropriate information about tribes while still carrying out their own unique and specific functions.

EVERALL FOX (Gros Ventre, Fort Belknap Indian Community) is dean of academic affairs at Little Big Horn College, Crow Agency, Mont.

THE MISSION OF TRIBAL COLLEGES

Tribal colleges were created as a response to demands for higher education opportunities in Native communities. Starting in 1968 with the establishment of Navajo Community College, tribes began bringing college courses to their members. During the early 1970s, many tribal colleges in Montana began developing partnerships with existing community colleges and four-year institutions to create satellite campuses on reservations. Tribal education leaders worked with a newly formed organization, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, to lay the groundwork for the establishment of Montana's first tribal colleges. In 1984, Salish Kootenai College in Pablo became the state's first accredited tribally controlled college. Today, all seven of Montana's tribal colleges are fully accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

Tribal colleges have become success stories unto themselves. Their graduates have gone to work for the tribes or have gone on to obtain bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. While increasing tribal members' access to higher education, the colleges have also helped to maintain and preserve tribal cultures and languages. Tribal history and language courses are part of the core graduation requirements at tribal colleges, and many have established tribal archives to store and protect important photos and documents. For some students, attending one of these colleges may be their first opportunity to learn about their history and culture from a tribal perspective.

Little Big Horn College, located in Crow Agency, Mon-

tana, is a good example of the tribal colleges' role in transmitting and preserving culture. The college's mission statement reads, in part, "The College is committed to the preservation, perpetuation, and protection of Crow culture and language and respects the distinct bilingual and bicultural aspects of the Crow Indian community."¹ Students can take Crow Language I, Crow Language II, and Conversational Crow. Other course offerings, such as Crow Social and Familial Kinship and History of the Crow Chiefs, address Crow culture and history. Students may even earn a two-year degree in Crow Studies. Staff members and students converse in Crow in class and at work. The College Board of Trustees conducts its business meetings in the Crow language. David Yarlott, Jr., president of Little Big Horn College, stresses the importance of the Crow language and culture to the college: "The part in our mission statement that states 'committed to the preservation, perpetuation, and protection of Crow culture and language'

says it all for me. It is not only a statement, but I *feel* it. I encourage permeating the language, culture, and history of the Apsaalooke People throughout the college."²

Tribal colleges provide a high-quality education to their students and employment opportunities to tribal members, as well as sponsoring countless other community outreach programs, all the while operating on budgets that are stretched to the breaking point. The administration, faculty, and staff of Montana's seven tribal colleges do amazing work with limited resources. They have demonstrated through their work and dedication that it is possible for schools to include culturally relevant curriculum as part of their academic offerings.

TRIBAL COLLEGES AND IEFA

With the implementation of IEFA, tribal colleges have become the center of attention as educators across the state are looking for ways to incorporate information about Montana's Indians into their own curricula. Because tribal colleges have been doing this very thing for many years, they hold the key not only to a wealth of information on their respective tribes but also to the successful integration

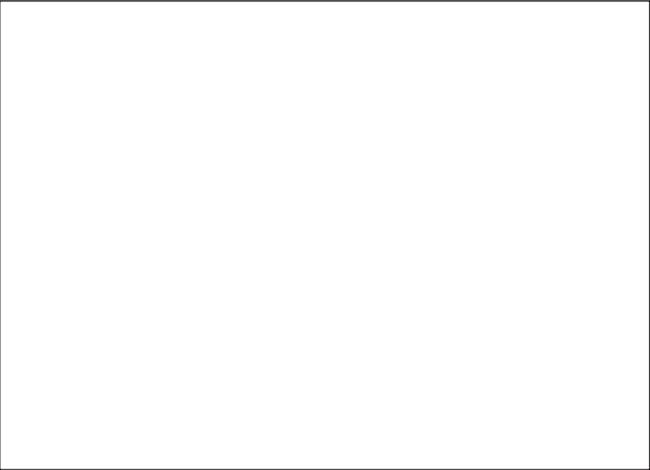
of that information across the curriculum. For example, Cliff Goude-lock, an instructor at Little Big Horn College, has developed an information systems curriculum that revolves around projects that are based on familiar themes found in Crow culture and within the students' own community. Goude-lock has said, "The major obstacles that students faced in my classes were interpreting and understanding the computer terminology in the textbooks and not being able to relate to the research projects."³ Lanny Real Bird, who teaches business and Crow language, has developed curriculum materials that will help educators in elementary and secondary schools teach the Crow language. The teaching materials include a teacher manual, flash cards, and an interactive DVD. In an interview with the *Billings Gazette*, Real Bird said he hopes the teaching materials can be introduced in public schools off the reservation or in after-school study groups for Crow children living in urban areas.⁴

Other IEFA-related work is being conducted at Blackfeet Community College in Browning, where faculty members have developed teaching standards for including information about the Blackfeet tribe in K-12 education. Salish Kootenai College in Pablo has been working on a history



of the Salish people that will dovetail with the college's work on the Tribal Histories Project. Chief Dull Knife College in Lame Deer has worked with Dawson County High School and the Billings Public Schools to offer training to teachers. Little Big Horn College in Crow Agency has partnered with Canyon Creek Elementary School District in Billings and hosted a teachers' institute in Billings focused on Indian Education for All.

Sharing curriculum ideas and developmental processes has been integral to the growth and sustainability of language and culture programs at tribal colleges.⁵ Even before their involvement with IEFA, tribal colleges had formed partnerships with the local schools in their communities. Through programs like the Rural Systemic Initiative and the federal TRIO Programs for low-income students, they have built bridges to the K-12 community.



THE TRIBAL HISTORIES PROJECT

The funds that the Montana legislature allocated to the

tribal colleges in 2005 for the Tribal Histories Project may be the catalyst for getting accurate and appropriate information about Indians into Montana's classrooms. As mentioned earlier, each college will work on its own tribe's history. The tribal histories will be produced in a variety of formats but will have one commonality: each will be portrayed from the tribe's perspective. History is often skewed toward the story of a society's dominant group or toward the ideology of myth building and hero worship. Many accounts of American Indian history written by non-Indians

have been criticized for being riddled with inaccuracies, promoting racial stereotypes, and generally furthering a patronizing attitude toward Natives.

The intent of the Tribal Histories Project is not to create revisionist history or to impose political correctness, but rather to present history from another perspective. An example used by Mike Jetty, Indian education specialist with the Montana Office of Public Instruction, is the concept of "Westward Expansion." When viewed from the perspective of the American Indian, "Westward Expansion"

Indian Education for All: THROUGH OUR OWN EYES

IEFA in an Urban Public School

BY PHYLLIS NGAI AND KAREN ALLEN

LEWIS & Clark Elementary School in Missoula, Montana, is an urban school located on the traditional homeland of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribes, near the current Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana. Though the majority of students are white, the number of Indian students has gradually increased over the years and now represents approximately 20% of our student population.

Lewis & Clark staff members and parents believe that Indian education is relevant to and beneficial for all students, both Indians and non-Indians. Our vision for Indian Education for All (IEFA) is a form of place-based multicultural education. Through learning about our local Indian tribes, all students are learning about a different cultural perspective and different world view. We have seen the curriculum come alive for children, their understanding of their own cultures deepen, and their ability to tap into the synergy of diversity sharpen.

At Lewis & Clark, more than 20 teachers are integrating perspectives of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille into all subject areas. For example, the story of the bitterroot is part of the first-grade unit on native plants, and the cultural significance of the buffalo is a science topic for a nonfiction

writing project in the second grade. In addition, the third grade's integrated curriculum revolves around the Salish seasons, powwow serves as one of the contexts for fourth-grade social studies, and the fifth-grade research project is partly based on conversations with tribal elders.

The power of this place-based approach is that the children do not have to learn everything from books. They can reach beyond the classroom to experience their community, in which diversity resides, and make face-to-face connections with local people who are different from them. At Lewis & Clark, teachers and students learn from five elders and eight tribal members who come to our classrooms regularly to share stories based on an indigenous world view, to teach us what they learned from their ancestors, to speak with us in their Native language, to bring us humor and wisdom, and to open their hearts for new relationships that heal old wounds and bridge current gaps between Indians and whites.

Through the voices and faces of the local Indian people, Indian children of different tribes have been able to connect personally with their learning, and non-Indian children have discovered a new cultural realm in which "my" perspective is only one of many, and "the others" are fascinating and enriching. Listening to Salish neighbors talk about how much they value their unique cultural practices, children have found "culture" a dynamic subject, and ethnic minorities have found it safe to explore and express their own search for cultural identities. IEFA has already proved to be a powerful form of multicultural education that is overdue in U.S. public schools. **K**

PHYLLIS NGAI is a faculty member at the University of Montana, Missoula, and a parent at Lewis & Clark School. She can be contacted at phyllis.ngai@mso.umt.edu. KAREN ALLEN is the principal of Lewis & Clark School. Her e-mail address is kallen@mcps.k12.mt.us.

becomes an “Eastern Invasion.”⁶ By telling their history in their own words, the tribes will give the K-12 community of Montana an opportunity to examine a history that will be unlike any written before.

The people at the tribal colleges who are working on this project have been experiencing the challenge of gathering and preparing information. The histories are a marriage between such academic disciplines as history, archeology, and historical geography and the oral tradition of each tribal group. Some long-held beliefs will be challenged, and others may be replaced with a new way of thinking.

As many who are writing their tribal histories are discovering, there is a lot of information that can be shared. How much each tribal group is willing to share is a question that remains to be answered. Tribes must decide for themselves what is to be made available to the greater public and what is to be held as private. For example, just as in any cultural group, issues of religion and spirituality may be considered too sacred to be shared publicly. However, because tribal culture is rooted in and intertwined with spiritual beliefs, it may be difficult to discuss culture without touching on some aspect of these sacred matters.

Issues involving language are of concern to many tribes as well. Tribal languages were once viewed as barriers to the assimilation of Indians into the dominant society. Every effort was made to suppress the speaking of tribal languages. Once tribes began efforts to maintain and, in some cases, revive their languages, they became protective of them. Under these circumstances, some tribes may not want to share their languages with the greater public. Whatever tribes decide to share will be entirely up to them, but at least they will finally be in the new position of telling others about themselves as opposed to having someone else do it for them.

One important factor that may affect the role tribal colleges play in K-12 education is the extent of the demands placed on their resources and personnel. Many administrators, instructors, and staff members in Montana’s tribal colleges have duties and responsibilities that go beyond their job titles. Tribal colleges have to weigh the benefits and costs of every request that comes from an outside agency. Richard Littlebear, president of Chief Dull Knife College in Lame Deer, has explained, “These personnel have full-time jobs working for the college, so whatever they do is over and above their regular jobs. Finding time is difficult. We do not have the funds to operate a full-fledged program to help K-12 schools.”⁷ The K-12 community is under similar constraints with regard to time and resources. Working together, K-12 educators and tribal col-

leges need to find effective ways to collaborate and share information.

Another key partner to consider is the Office of Public Instruction (OPI). The Tribal Histories Project can be an excellent resource for teachers doing research in preparation for curriculum development. However, for the information to reach Montana’s classrooms, the tribal histories must be put into a format that teachers can readily access and use. The early feedback on the project shows an abundance of information coming in the form of printed documents, such as books and papers. The first step in building the bridge between the OPI and the tribal colleges will be to work together to transform the tribal histories into lessons and units that incorporate the Essential Understandings (see the sidebar on page 189) as well as the Montana K-12 Content and Performance Standards.

Montana has an opportunity to show the rest of the nation how this groundbreaking initiative can be brought to fruition. Stakeholders across the state have to come together in a collaborative effort to take this endeavor to the next level. Tribal colleges in Montana have the knowledge and expertise to assist with the implementation. David Yarlott sums up the colleges’ unique contribution: “I think the tribal colleges play a critical role in Indian Education for All. Who can better lead the way [than] the institutions that have the access to ‘valid’ resources? Why is it valid? Because we live it on a daily basis — it is not a suit or a costume we put on when we feel like it.”⁸

With the right amount of planning and collaboration, strong partnerships between tribal colleges, the OPI, K-12 schools, and various other organizations working to develop materials and support services can take root. While Richard Littlebear is aware of the need for the tribal colleges not to overextend themselves, he also recognizes that “Native American people have to step forward and help implement this academically revolutionary initiative so that we can show mainstream people that we can take advantage of these kinds of wonderful opportunities.”⁹

1. Little Big Horn College Catalog, 2005-2007, p. 1.

2. David Yarlott, Jr., interview, June 2006.

3. Cliff Goudelock, interview, June 2006.

4. Laura Tode, “Teachers Hope to Stir Life into Crow Language,” *Billings Gazette*, 14 June 2006, p. B-1.

5. Maenette K. P. Ah Nee-Benham and Wayne J. Stein, eds., *The Renaissance of American Indian Higher Education: Capturing the Dream* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2003).

6. Mike Jetty, presentation at the Indian Education for All Institute, 17 June 2005, Missoula, Mont.

7. Richard Littlebear, interview, May 2006.

8. Yarlott interview.

9. Littlebear interview.

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For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0789
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
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