

# **Freedom to Learn**

**A Tribal Reservation-Based and Community Determined Program  
for a  
Liberal Arts Degree**

**by**

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## An Indian Community Based/Community Determined Program for a Liberal Arts Degree

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The Evergreen State College is the host for an unusual educational experiment--a Reservation-Based and Community-Determined (RB/CD) post-secondary program operating on four separate Indian Reservations. The overall program is augmented by a cooperative relationship with the Northwest Indian College on the Lummi Reservation. The combination of community, tribal and state cooperation has produced a unique program that builds diverse leadership in local communities. This multi-reservation program rooted in the philosophy of empowering individuals, was created to affirm cultural standards and thus strengthen Indian nations from within. Relying on the knowledge base of each tribal community each CB/CD program reflects the local realities, needs, priorities and community goals. The program gives each student the freedom to learn.

The philosophical framework under girding the Indian Community Based/Community-Determined program takes into account historical relations between Indian nations and the United States of America. The program depends on an educational perspective grounded in tribal realities. The following discussion is an attempt to give literal substance to this philosophical framework.

### **The Paradox of Education and the Wrong Role**

The general purpose of education everywhere in the world is to enable people to fulfill a role(s) in their community or country to the best of their ability. For Indians in the United States of America, this has always posed a paradox: An Indian desiring to become a community leader, leaves the community or reservation to attend an educational institution and learns roles that do not fit the needs or wants of one's own people/community. Upon returning home they are unable to apply their learning to the local needs. Often social pressures forces such people to leave the community.

From the time Indian children enter the American education system, whether it be on or off reservation, private or public schools or colleges, or Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, the child must leave behind community and cultural values if they are to be successful in that setting. The education provided works to prepare Indian children to be a part of a cultural community of which they are not a member.

The Brookings Institute's 1928 *Problem of Indian Administration* by Lewis Meriam revealed that Indians were in poor health, poorly educated, and had not adjusted to American society. The United States government sought, through specific design, to tear apart tribal communities, but it was assumed Indians would become a part of the *melting pot*. Some policies aimed at this goal included the General Allotment Act, boarding schools, and denial of religious freedom by outlawing

\* Originally published under this title as Occasional Paper #22 by the Center for World Indigenous Studies - Olympia - Oakland - Vancouver (Canada).

Potlatch ceremonies. Over time, these conditions did not change despite the Meriam Survey. Forty-years later the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare report **A National Tragedy a National Challenge** (1969) came to virtually the same conclusions as the Brookings study.

In 1975 the United States Congress enacted the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act. The American Indian Policy Review Commission, which had conducted a two-year study on U.S. policies toward Indian tribes released its report in May 1977. Both of these U.S. government documents highlighted the dysfunction of the U.S. education system and the continuing negative experiences of Indian peoples.

The Self-Determination Act officially recognized that the American education system wasn't working for Indians--they were neither being effectively integrated into the U.S. paradigm nor prepared to assume roles in tribal communities. The 1975 Act concluded that Indians should take direct responsibility for the education of their people. It was thus that Indians began the task of taking control of something that was not only alien, but had been a destructive and dehumanizing experience for most Indian adults.

## **Education with an "Indian Face"**

The idea that the Euro-American system of education was appropriate and should be copied by Indian people had been firmly implanted after years of denigrating Indian cultures and values. In time, many Indians were programmed by education institutions set up to promote western European values. Part of the programming, promoted the belief that all this education system needed was an "Indian face". The rationale was to provide Indian youngsters with "role models."

This "Indian education" was even more oppressive than the education with the Euro-American face, because Indian people began to believe it was theirs. The curriculum content, in order to meet the state requirements, remained the same.

"Special programs" were introduced to give "education an Indian feel," but these weren't and are not now considered legitimately academic. They are considered *fluff* programs by many educators.

As Indians began to understand how power had been taken from them through the very education system that should have empowered them, new ways of thinking about "appropriate education" for self-Determination began to develop. By endorsing an Indian-determined education U.S. political and Indian education leaders found a way to be free from the oppression of "white guilt", "missionary spirit" and "paternal attitudes and actions". All of these tendencies originating in European cultures had been the focus of criticism since the 1928 Meriam Report.

## **Conflict of Values**

"Education with an Indian face" was introduced on the campuses of colleges and universities in the form of Indian Studies Programs in the late 1960's. They were rationalized as a method for attracting Indian students to the college campus and as a way to help build Indian student self-esteem after they arrive on the campus. These programs also encouraged Indian students to assimilate into the dominant society. The conflict between tribal values and the system of values emphasized on the college campus was a barrier to success for the Indian students. They experienced a serious cultural clash.

A big conflict that Indian students experienced arose when they were confronted with the institutional emphasis on individualism. Individual achievement is prized in American education beginning at the time the child enters school. Shutiva, (1991) identified 14 attitudes and values adhered to by most Indians. Among these is "The individual is less important than the group." In most tribal cultures, contributing to the group in a way that is meaningful and constructive is a dominant value.

This idea of separating the individual from the whole contributes to the idea of identifying Indians as a minority, (i.e. American Indian) instead of identifying individuals as a member of a

distinct nation. When this happens the Indian in effect loses identity as a tribal community member. The disconnected Indian is forced to become a minority promoting the assimilation of Indians into the mainstream population. This negates the sovereignty of Indian Nations in the process.

Indians can never become a "minority" in the same sense that immigrant populations are "minorities" unless they are willing to give up or deny their tribal identity and live away from their nation. Educational institutions insist on identifying Indians as minorities. These institutions will continue to identify them as minorities until they recognize the sovereignty of the Indian Nations. By recognizing the political identity of Indian nations, colleges and universities will make the shift to recognizing the identity of Indian people. It becomes a question: Do we as college faculty and administrators recognize the political legitimacy of Indian nations, and the different peoples as distinct with their own cultures and value systems?

## **Duality of Culture**

Freire (*Pedagogy Of the Oppressed*) speaks to the duality of culture that occurs through manipulation by an oppressor. Most Indians experience this duality as a constant war inside themselves. Indian students learn from the day they start school, that (considering the Indian experience) what is taught does not necessarily have basis in fact. This duality continues throughout the educational experience, until they give up their native (national experience) identity (whether they acknowledge it or not), and accept the non-Indian world as their reality. Then if they should choose to return to the reservation they return with a different reality than the one experienced by the community. They either leave feeling rejected or work to re-educate themselves in the community knowledge base. Indians either give up the reality of their community and determine that the community is backward, or through great struggle realize most of their education is not relevant to their reservation/community life. The education they receive is often tantamount to total betrayal of community values and acceptance of the Euro-American world view of the United States. This world view is not consistent with the reality of preparing for the Seventh Generation of off-spring, or respect and honor for the generations of Indians who have already past. Part of the sadness of this is that the person comes back to the reservation totally unprepared to be a member of the community. Until they regain the part of their duality that they gave up to succeed in the university, they will either become a "dictator" (one who does not give any credence to the voices of the people) on the reservation or they simply leave. Russell Barsh and James Henderson noted:

Bureaucrats and reformers always assumed that Indians wanted to be Americanized, but would have to be made to understand Americanism before they are permitted to enjoy its blessings. Current events suggest that Congress is still not persuaded that the lesson has been learned. (1980 p. 94)

The unwillingness to be "Americanized" or "United Statesianed" becomes a major problem when people look to traditional higher education institutions as the answer to the education needs of Indian nations. The Bureau of Indian Affairs as administrator of tribal resources historically ignored the cultural values of the people. It served the United States government's interests to dismantle the tribal lands and popular unity. Tribal leaders in their desire to build an economic base have often acted from what Freire calls the "oppressor within:" Set aside the values of the people and follow the "American Way." This "way" lacked the cultural considerations of tribal values. Badwound in his dissertation states that:

From the tribal perspective, however, one assumes that group welfare prevails and goals emerge only after extensive group interactions occur. Individuals unite around common interests, but they ascribe to formal procedures insofar as those procedures do

not stifle participator decision making. The leader, according to the tribal perspective, does not maintain autocratic power by virtue of position, but develops authority by nurturing the institutional beliefs that individuals share. Instead of remaining aloof from the environment, the tribal view demands that the organization is integral to the environment. Demonstrated concern for group welfare is virtuous and thus the organization maintains an active relationship with the entities in the environment.

While this sounds good, the reality is, many tribal leaders have accepted the "American" belief that tribal people are not sophisticated enough to participate in the decision making-process. Those who know best, it is argued, will make the decisions for them. This attitude directly results from attending colleges and universities and "becoming experts" in a field of study, but not experts enough to recognize that the real experts are the community members.

## **Early Experiences**

An early (1744) recorded experience of the paradox (quoted from Bordeaux 1990) was when the commissioners of the government of Virginia offered to educate the young men of the Six Nations Confederacy. The leaders replied:

... when they came back to us, they were bad runners; ignorant of every means of living in the woods; unable to bear either cold or hunger; knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy; spoke our language imperfectly; were, therefore, neither fit for hunters, warriors, or counselors, they were totally good for nothing. We have some experience of your education, the young men return home worthless, they can neither run nor hunt

They declined the offer. The chiefs then offered to educate some of the sons of the Virginians and to:

... take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.

While the necessary skills to be an effective community member have changed, that the education approach is inappropriate remains the same.

The official policy of the United States government has been to "remold the Indian's conception of life" (Szasz 1974 p.8). The Kennedy Report in 1969, revealed the devastation caused through Indian Education. The Report stated "the dominant policy of the Federal Government toward the American Indian has been one of coercive assimilation" (Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge 1969 p.113) During U.S. President Richard Nixon's term, a commitment was made to support self-determination for Indians in all areas of their lives. When the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975 was passed it included provisions for Indians to take control of the education institutions in their communities. The American Indian Policy Review Commission restated in 1977 the need for relevant education at all levels. Despite these official efforts little has been done by institutions of higher education to change. They remain irrelevant to Indian communities.

## **Indian Studies Programs**

As noted earlier, Indian Studies Programs became a part of the educational debate in the late 1960's. These programs were a part of a general emphasis (including Black Studies and Chicano Studies) on making higher education accessible for minority students. The "Indian component" had limited success helping the Indian student to build self-esteem and helping them to

stay in college. The major emphasis of these programs as well as other minority programs was to assimilate what was sometimes then called the "culturally impoverished" into "productive society" or to insure their success "within the anglo institutions." Bobby Wright examined 10 different Indian studies programs in the **Journal of American Indian Education**-- (Oct. 1990 p.17 & 18) he wrote:

. . . to varying degrees, they perform the same traditional functions as other academic departments; that is, teaching, research and service. Unlike most academic units, however, American Indian Studies programs assume other unique roles, including American Indian student support services, student recruitment, and affirmative action responsibilities.

Wright (p 19) further explained the purposes of Indian Studies and how they fit into not only the academic experience of Indian students but the experience of all students.

American Indian studies programs typically offer instruction in interdisciplinary courses of study focusing on Native American culture, history and contemporary affairs . . . . These and other institutions rely on ethnic studies programs to respond to this general education need. Consequently, the American Indian studies role is expanding beyond providing a scholastic specialization for a limited audience. Today their academic importance penetrates the very core of college curriculum, addressing a critical need for diversity in the academy.

While Wright doesn't say it directly, he implies that these programs help ease Indians first into the university then into the greater society. He leaves out any reference to them being prepared to become strong leaders in their communities. His recommendations call for: 1. looking at the role of Indian studies as applied to all students, 2. Academic achievement through becoming a part of the educational system, 3. quality of scholarship, and 4. the adequate funding of these programs. While these are encouraging recommendations they omit the need to focus education in support of each Indian nation's goals. Nowhere is it argued that the purpose of Indian Studies is to support tribal sovereignty or build the Indian community.

### **Tribally Controlled Community Colleges**

The Tribally Controlled Community College system began with the opening of the Navajo Community College in 1969. Since then 26 colleges have been established or reorganized to be tribally controlled. The Sinte Gleska College has since established a four-year program. These colleges have made a major impact on the character of leadership on reservations and training people for positions within their communities. Lionel R. Bordeaux, President of the oldest Tribally Controlled College (Tribal Colleges, *Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, Fall 1990 p. 8) discusses the reason the colleges started and how they must continue states:

Why did tribal colleges start? Tribal colleges represented a direct response to the problems that Indian students experienced at off-reservation institutions. Problems such as financial aid limitations, cultural isolation and *tiospaye* (family/kinship) considerations, all of which contributed to high drop-out rates and a perception of failure.

Bordeaux further states:

Equally important in the evolution of tribal colleges was the need to develop a local forum to discuss community and tribal issues and to address future reservation challenges. Tribal colleges would be a vehicle for strengthening tribal nations through

academic learning, training and cultural preservation. Combine western teachings and a strong emphasis on cultural preservation and the end-product is a tribal college. Building from a cultural base, the essence of tribal colleges continues to be human growth and people empowerment for the strengthening of a tribal nation.

Acceptance and recognition of the importance of the tribal colleges has been a long and hard struggle. The provision in many U.S. Indian treaties which stipulates that the U.S. Government will provide education to the Indian people in return for land has, like many other guarantees, not been realized. The **Navajo Community College Act** and the **Tribally Controlled College Act** have been major steps in fulfilling this treaty agreement. While the colleges have received approval for their curriculum from the accreditation agency (NWSC), many courses that are essential to the survival of the people are not accepted for transfer to the public institutions of higher education. In 1990 the Carnegie Foundation studied the colleges, the report was a major step in recognizing the importance of relevant education for the Indian Nations. Boyer wrote in the forward to the report:

Viewed by numbers alone, tribal colleges add up to only a small fraction of total higher education picture the equivalent perhaps of a small branch of a single state university. But using conventional yardsticks to measure these colleges misses the significance of their work. Instead, the achievements of tribal colleges must be compared to the poor performance of past Indian education programs. Three centuries of effort, the report stated, did not produce the sense of hope and opportunity that Indian controlled colleges are creating. In addition, they must be viewed as part of their own cultures where their impact is real and significant. In some cases, tribal colleges are the only institutions on a reservation to address the many pressing social, cultural and economic needs of the community. When viewed from these perspectives, tribal colleges assume a mission of great consequence to Native Americans and the nation.

In the State of Washington there is one such tribally controlled institution. The Northwest Indian College has from its founding struggled to survive. The college is geographically isolated from the other Tribally controlled colleges and because of academic pressure has chosen non-Indians for the top positions which further isolates it from the community perspective. The outreach coordinator from the college has established branch campus's on a few of the other reservations, these have primarily been vocationally oriented. The need to decide educational goals in the local community often is a major block to the establishment of programs on other reservations. Major populations of Indians in the state have little opportunity to obtain an education relevant to tribal needs. The Tribally Controlled Community Colleges serve a small part of the population, the need for four-year institutions that recognize the need for community determined education is essential.

## **Bachelors Degrees**

Tribally controlled colleges are doing a good job of educating their community members--often students have as many as 220 credits taking everything they can at the college. The transition to a traditional four-year college still is not the answer to the educational needs of the Indian community. Indians in four-year schools experience disenchantment with adverse affects on their academic achievement. Verna Kirkness when studying the effects of higher education institutions in both Canada and the United States (*Journal of American Indian Education*, May 1991) wrote:

American Indian/First Nations/Native people have been historically under-represented in the ranks of college and university graduates in Canada and the United States. From an institutional perspective, the problem has been typically defined in terms of low achievement, high attrition, poor retention, weak persistence, etc., thus placing the onus for adjustment on the student. From the perspective of the Indian student,

however, the problem is often cast in more human terms, with an emphasis on the need for a higher educational system that respects them for who they are, that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives.

The Indian student who has lived within a family culture has responsibilities within these relationships which are often in conflict with the education system. If the Indian should leave home and attend an off-reservation institution of higher learning it usually takes between six months to a year to adapt to the educational environment or to recognize that they cannot adapt. Celebrations, which are essential to the well being of the individual often conflict with times and dates for classes. The thin line between being able to stay in the college or to return home is very fragile.

Jack Forbes' (1976 Journal of Indian Education) paper "An American Indian University: A proposal for Survival" stated:

One of the greatest problems facing the American Indian today is the lack of trained leadership . . . . No Institution is designed to really meet the fundamental needs of the Indian community, which needs an institution of higher learning both Indian controlled and Indian centered,

He further stated:

An American Indian University would, however, do much more than merely "preserve" tribes. It could be the means for educating large numbers of Indians in an environment suitable for the development of self-confidence, both individual and collective. The present policy of sending Indian young people off to alien Euro-American dominated colleges often lowers self-esteem, produces failures, and creates personal confusion. In addition, those Indian students who "make the grade" are neither psychologically nor technically capable of leading their people forward. Often they choose to make a living among non-Indians or, if they do return home, they are sometimes alienated enough from their own people as to be poor leaders or no leaders at all.

Sinte Gleska College is the first of the colleges to offer a bachelors degree program Gerald Mohatt in his article "Dream and Reality: The founding and future of Sinte Gleska College" (Tribal Colleges fall 1990) reviewed the college and its successes. In speaking of the reality he states:

As a bridge, the college has been successful, perhaps primarily with its bachelors graduates who have gone to law and graduate school rather than its non-graduate transfer students. Many undergraduates have elected to stay and complete their education at the college rather than transfer after a year or an Associate of Arts degree. Additionally, significant numbers of individuals take courses at the college in the summer for a semester while attending off-reservation schools. The college's students do stay and do provide the leadership in many positions previously held by outsiders. A significant increase in the number of Lakota teachers has occurred because of the college . . . . They have become leaders committed, as we had hoped, to their home as a place of hope, a place to raise their children and a place to contribute to the improvement of the quality of reservation life.

The Salish-Kootenai Community College has a four-year nursing degree program and other colleges are moving in the direction of providing four year programs recognizing the lack of success students are having in transferring to the universities and colleges and their inability to come home



and become leaders in their communities.

The very survival of American Indian nations is often at cross-purposes with the American society. Disputes between Indian Country and the United States over natural resources, ownership of land, legal jurisdiction, along with cultural and spiritual value differences are frequently subjects before United States courts. This experience often stimulates "white guilt" but this does not help Indians survive. Well meaning and caring people want to help, but their help is usually for the "poor Indian" and put in terms of what they can do--not what Indians can do for themselves.. Then there are the people who will do things for you, or speak for you because "Indians are not aggressive." There are also those who will give you a passing grade because you are an Indian, not because you earned it. Such behavior often destroys the Indian student's will to do as well or better than other students. When the (helper) doors, of "white guilt," "missionary spirit" and paternal attitudes and actions, are open the student learns to be dependent and this will not and cannot build and empower students to take action in their communities. Given the unique legal, economic, social and religious constraints, experienced by these students and the pain they carry everyday there is a need to address these questions without the aid of "helpers." Only within the community will the freedom exist to reveal, discuss and take actions which can transform the students, and also their community.

The reconstruction and recognition of the responsibility that comes with the values and beliefs of the people will only happen when discussion happens around these issues. This debate needs to take place within the environment that has the scars that must be healed. Paul Boyer (*Tribal Colleges Summer*, 1990 p. 9) commented on this:

To solve their problems in uniquely Indian ways. The goal of this movement is not integration within the white culture or separation from it. Instead many Native Americans are attempting to walk between the two and pick the best of each.

Lionel Bordeaux, said:

There was a need to "develop a local forum to discuss community and tribal issues."

## **From the Tribal Perspective**

Tribal communities recognized early tribal leaders for their great oratory. The discourse that enabled them to communicate so effectively has been diminished among tribal people because of loss of control over their being on this *Turtle Island*. The discussion must begin again in each community if Indian people gain control over their social, economic and political future. The Tribally Controlled Community Colleges have long recognized this need. Special workshops and limited programs provide only a patch work. A truly liberal education will provide Indian students opportunity to examine world and tribal issues from the tribal perspective. The Reservation-Based/Community- Determined program is a starting place. It affirms the essential education experience which leads to enabling people to regain power over their futures. Without discussion and a new consensus, Indian nations will continue to experience dependency and dysfunction. It is important that the "white guilt," "missionary spirit" and "paternalistic attitudes and actions" be prevented from interfering with the discussion. These are effective tools of oppression and tend to transfer responsibility and action to those not affected by the devastation.

The Evergreen State College's, Community Based, Community Determined program recognizes the academic validity of building on community knowledge and empowering students to be effective in their community. For policy to be effect it must be developed in Indian Country by the people affected by it. To make this happen community members need to become knowledgeable

of the various elements which affect their lives. Through cooperation between communities, Tribal and a State institution, a new educational paradigm to address this educational need on Indian reservations is emerging.

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