

Adapting to change UNL Indians balance tradition with change

The poster hanging on the bulletin board at the Winnebago Indian Community College reads like an army enlistment enticement: "College — It's just not for them, why not for you?"

Statistics indicate that only 4 percent of the total bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States will go to American Indians, while 86 percent will go to Caucasian students. Indians will receive only 2 percent of the professional degrees awarded while Caucasian students will receive 90 percent.

Whether Indian students' problems are brought on by cultural differences, prejudice or ignorance of educational needs, the final tally is the same: Indian students are going to school but they're not staying through graduation.

Many Indian students don't even make it through the first semester of

college. They drop out and return home, said Miriam Kearnes, vice chairman of the Winnebago Public School Board.

One reason for the dropout rate might be because secondary schools "haven't equipped them academically," Kearnes said.

The tribe wants students to come back from college and provide leadership and direction for the community, but that can only happen when the student has a good academic foundation, she said.

"We want them to be kids and enjoy life," Kearnes said, "but somewhere in the back of your mind there's still the idea that we want them to come back and lead the people."

As a result, the curriculum has been revamped at Winnebago Public School, she said. The tougher curriculum is designed to improve academic skills but also teaches students that competition and success are acceptable.

Santee Public School counselor Lee Wilch said the Santee School Board also plans for curriculum changes to prepare students, but he is creating a new program that will entice seniors with actual campus experience.

Seniors should do more than just tour a university, Wilch said. Under the new program, seniors will spend an entire day with a sponsor student attending college classes, meeting students and talking to staff.

Saunie Wilson, academic dean for the Nebraska Indian Community College, said a poor basic education is a stumbling block

for any advanced education, so more Indians are using the community college as a means to finally finish high school diploma, receive a two-year degree or as a stepping stone on the way to a four-year degree.

The community college provides an in-between atmosphere to wean students away from the high school and family, Wilson said. The student can adjust to aspects of college life within the familiar surroundings of the Indian community.

Culture shock affects many of the young students that leave the Indian community to attend a college elsewhere, Wilson said.

The Nebraska Indian Community College is an accredited vocational/liberal arts institution chartered by the Santee, Winnebago and Omaha tribes.

The college is composed of three sites, one on each reservation, with the central offices being located at the Winnebago site.

Helen Long Soldier, counselor for Multi-Cultural Affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said UNL could do a lot of things with its central site in the state.

UNL is right on the edge of the southern and northern plains. The university has the potential to become an American Indian cultural center for both areas.

But UNL doesn't offer many American Indian courses, she said.

"At this large a university there should be that much more and there isn't—there's that much less," Long Soldier said. Even if a student decides UNL will

fulfill his or her educational needs, many will not graduate because of financial problems, Long Soldier said.

Most university students are under the impression that American Indian students receive all types of special financial aid. In reality, Indian students receive the same types of financial aid as other students.

Student assistance is available from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, she said, but it is very limited.

The tribe determines who will receive BIA funds and most have a maximum award amount. The award is not automatic. Students must have qualifying grades and show financial need.

"There isn't enough BIA money for everyone who wants to go to school and every other available source of funds must be exhausted before they even look at you," Long Soldier said.

Whether personal or financial, many Indian students have some type of problem with adjusting to university life, she said. The Multi-Cultural Affairs office offers counseling services for students who are having problems.

"This year the Indian student organization (University of Nebraska Inter-Tribal Exchange) is the best I've ever seen it," Long Soldier said.

The organization provides support and social activities for American Indian students on campus.



Learning

against the odds

Students should be exposed to an entirely different culture as part of their education, according to Charles Ballard, associate professor of English and ethnic studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"You must educate yourself — be aware," he said.

Students have difficulty seeing that any problem exists, Ballard said. "They are in their own little world and they're comfortable. They're worried about Friday night. Who cares about a few minorities that hardly anyone sees?" Ballard said.

There are 55 American Indian students registered at UNL according to university statistics.

Saunie Wilson drives the 260 mile round trip to UNL every Thursday night for a research class towards her doctorate in public administration.

When she is not attending UNL, Wilson is the academic dean for the Nebraska Indian Community College at the Winnebago central offices.

Wilson originally comes from the Oglala Sioux Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, but said she was drawn to her position at the Winnebago college because her grandmother was a full-blooded Winnebago.

Wilson said she intends to stay in Nebraska while she is attending UNL, but will return to the Pine Ridge reservation one day to help the community.

As a student and administrator, Wilson said she sees both sides of the coin when dealing with Indian education.

The Indian Community College deals with some of the same types of problems Indian students experience at UNL, Wilson said, but staff members at the Indian college understand them better.

"We know what they're going through," she said.

The primary problem is isolation from family, friends and culture on the university campus, she said.

"Indian students usually seek each other out in non-Indian controlled communities or even universities," Wilson said. Graduate school is even more lonely than undergraduate school, she said.

Wilson said most Indian graduate

students are from urban backgrounds and many are not aware of or do not practice traditional culture or religion. Support during graduate school is usually from other Indian students. Many times Indian students who don't take part in traditional culture or religion are apprehensive about those that do, she said.

In general, UNL students and staff members are ignorant about American Indian culture and tradition, she said.

People are not "aware of how we're different or why we feel we're different," Wilson said.

Professors should be aware of how cultural differences may affect any minority student in class, but the majority are not, she said.

Learning is affected by traditional values, Wilson said. Sitting in a class taking notes and writing papers is not the traditional Indian way of learning. Traditionally, Indian people are taught to learn by experiencing life—through visual and oral learning.

"Now (at UNL), it's only law if it's written in a book," and it is hard to adjust, Wilson said.

"All of the things you've learned in your life, skills that you've accumulated, doesn't mean anything because it's only important if you can write it down in a term paper," Wilson said.

The student not only has to keep up with the homework, she said, but with the education system itself.

Traditionally Indian students do not question teachers because they are expected to honor and respect teachers, Wilson said. Students are supposed to be quiet and learn, she said.

That creates a problem when the instructor expects participation in class, but the Indian student has been taught that speaking up and interrupting an elder or teacher is rude.

"That's the way I was brought up, so I sat very quietly in class," Wilson said. That silence affected grades in participation, she said.

Because American Indians are traditionally involved with extended family, student attendance may suffer. If a family member needs a ride home an Indian student will give them a ride.

Third or fourth cousins by non-Indian definition are considered as important as brothers or sister accord-

ing to the Indian kinship system.

"You serve your relatives in traditional Indian ways," Wilson said.

There are always things that come up because one has such large extended families, she said. Indian students are always busy and concerned with someone else, she said.

Wilson said a university student whose away from the reservation is a valuable resource to those at home with very little resources.

"I probably get called on more than other members of the family," Wilson said.

Indian culture also is not naturally competitive or aggressive. Indians compete only with themselves, Wilson said.

Indian culture doesn't follow the philosophy that one person should try to do better or be better than someone else, she said.

Classroom competition can be fierce, especially on the graduate level, she said. If an Indian student isn't trained to compete in the classroom at an earlier educational level, it's just one more technique the student must master about the university educational system, Wilson said.

After graduation, the student must decide between returning to the Indian community or find employment elsewhere.

When a student has a Ph.D. and \$20,000 in loans, he normally can't afford to return to the reservation. There aren't enough opportunities to go around, she said.

"So you don't go back. Then you've cut yourself off from the family," Wilson said.

The community begins to think that once a student leaves to enter the educational realm, the student won't be functional as part of the reservation anymore. People in the community might pressure high school seniors not to leave for fear of them not coming back, she said.

If the student decides to return to the reservation, he competes for scarce jobs, usually against people who may not have a formal education. An educated person sometimes is seen as a "threat" in that instance, she said.

Sometimes people have to choose between an education and cutting themselves off from the community, Wilson said.

Travis Parker, an Omaha Indian, had 40 students in his Macy Public School freshman class. By the time he graduated in 1983 there were 10 seniors. Out of those 10 students, Parker said he only knows of one student who has graduated from college.

Parker began his college career after three years of "bumming around" and is currently a sophomore in broadcasting/business at UNL.

Parker said he really enjoys broadcasting, but he won't return to the reservation to use those skills.

"There just aren't any opportunities," Parker said. He said his main goal is to own a radio station.

Parker said most of prejudice he's encountered off the reservation has been from people who are ignorant of the Indian culture.

When Parker first left the reservation, he moved to Kansas City "to see the outside world."

Parker said his roommates were from small towns in Iowa and Minnesota. When the landlady told them that they were moving in with a "big Indian guy," the roommates asked, "Which one of us is going to have to share a bedroom with him?"

"They were scared of me," Parker said.

While sitting and talking during their first night together, Parker said his roommates began to ask him questions about being an Indian.

"They asked me if I live in a teepee so I told them my family owns about six and seven of them and they believed me," Parker said. Later, Parker said he told his roommates he lived in a house like everyone else.

People shouldn't think it is rude to ask about Indian culture, Parker said. Gail Spotted Tail, an undeclared sophomore at UNL, says she won't return to the reservation either. But, she does plan to use her skills for the benefit of American Indians.

Spotted Tail said she wants to achieve something big, not just for the tribe.

"I'm learning as much as possible now because I lived in that environment (the reservation) all my life," Spotted Tail said.

Spotted Tail said she will probably have to transfer to another university to achieve her goals because UNL doesn't offer an exten-

sive American Indian curriculum.

Spotted Tail said most of her extra time is spent as president of UNITE, the University of Nebraska Inter-Tribal Exchange, a support group for American Indians on campus.

Spotted Tail said that although one must be an American Indian to hold office in the club, membership is open to all students who wish to support the Indian cause.

Last year's group wasn't active, but this year's group is already planning workshops to educate students about American Indians, she said.

In November, UNITE will also host a traditional dinner for the American Indian dance troupe appearing at UNL and send delegates to this year's National Indian Education Call to Conference.

Spotted Tail said being president of UNITE gave her experience in handling groups of people, but said big crowds concerned her when she first got to campus.

Spotted Tail said prejudice does exist on campus, but like many other Indian students, she said it is mostly out of ignorance about Indian culture.

Some students say they feel it all the time, others say they just don't take it personally, she said. An individual's sensitivity determines the degree to which one notices prejudice, she said.

Charles Ballard, associate professor of English and ethnic studies at UNL, said minorities are sensitized to prejudice during childhood.

"You finally find out as a child how different you are and it's usually not the child that finds out, it's other children who tell the child that he's different in some prejudicial way," Ballard said.

Ballard, a Cherokee/Quapaw Indian, said strong families and tribes such as his help eliminate inferior feelings brought on by prejudicial damage.

Minorities need to find a sense of community to be comfortable, he said.

Ballard said he felt uncomfortable attending Tulsa University because students were comparatively rich, but he found a place at Oklahoma State University with other students who were trying to get an education and didn't have much money.

"Where is your class or places to go to feel at home in Lincoln if you're Indian?" Ballard said.

Minorities are taught by non-Indians to exist in a mobile society," Ballard said, where there is no close-knit community, no stable family contact. This is unlike tribal life where kinship and family are the basis of Indian life, he said.

Typically, minorities come out of a society that has stable roots, like that of the Indian community, Ballard said. The community is stable because it exists on human relationships, not simply serving "a machine," he said.

"You might do with less, you might not have the opportunities, but you do have friends and that counts for a lot," Ballard said.

"If you are raised in a society like that, why would you just give it away to be drifting like a nomad across our society," Ballard said.

People need to look into the future and wonder if the Indian community will be the same as yesterday and today, Ballard said.

Tribalism is holding people back when there isn't any change for the future, Ballard said.

The tribe should think of people who leave the reservation as expanding the Indian community, he said. Indians are not just leaving home, they are expanding horizons into a larger community, he said.

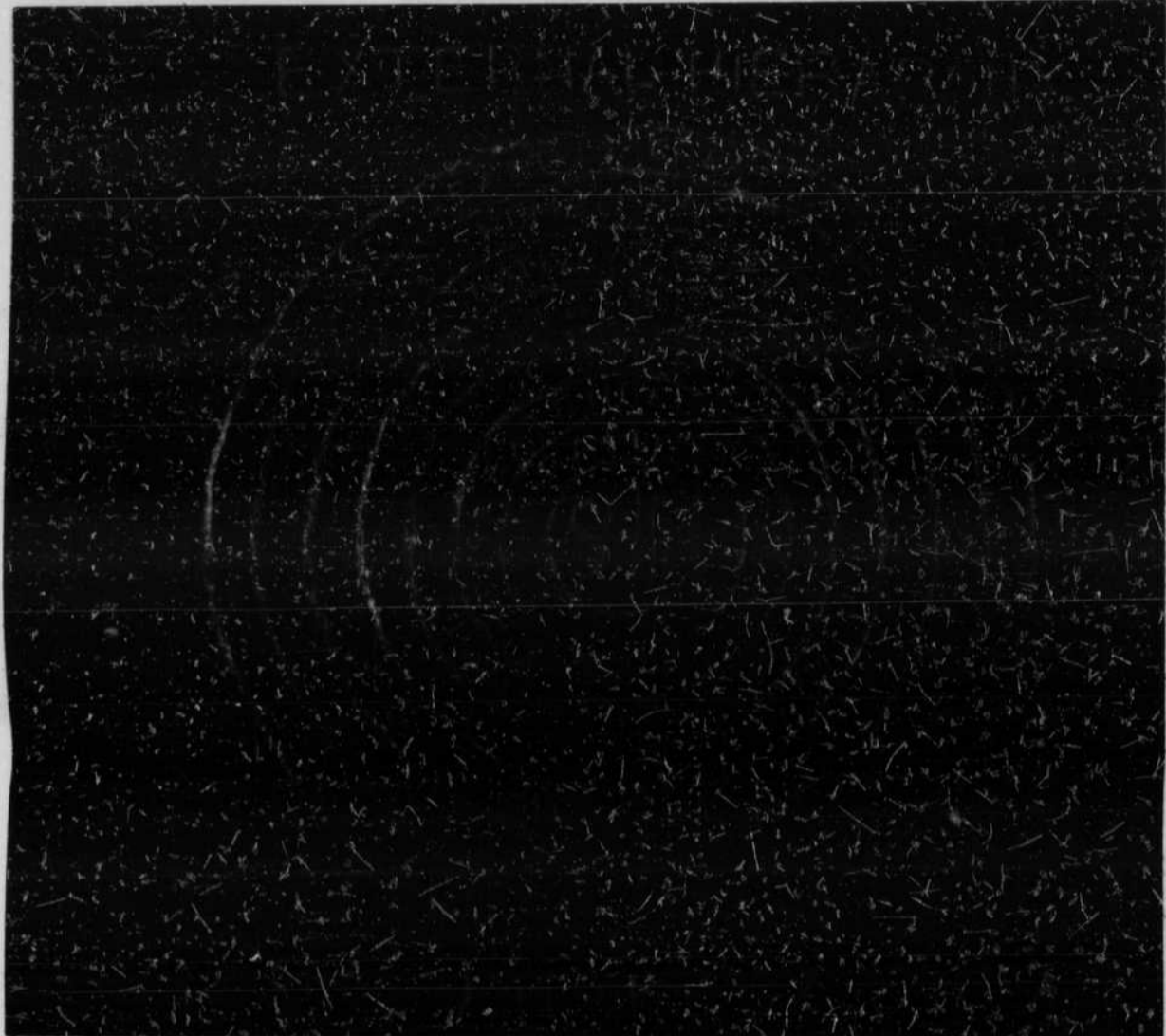
A person can leave the reservation and still be a part of the Indian community thanks to modern forms of communication, he said.

"It's a good sign when people begin to become conscious of their ethnic roots—that is a way of preparing themselves for eventual change," Ballard said.

"If you're going to move into the wide society, then you better be sure of who you are and know what is unique about yourself as a minority person."

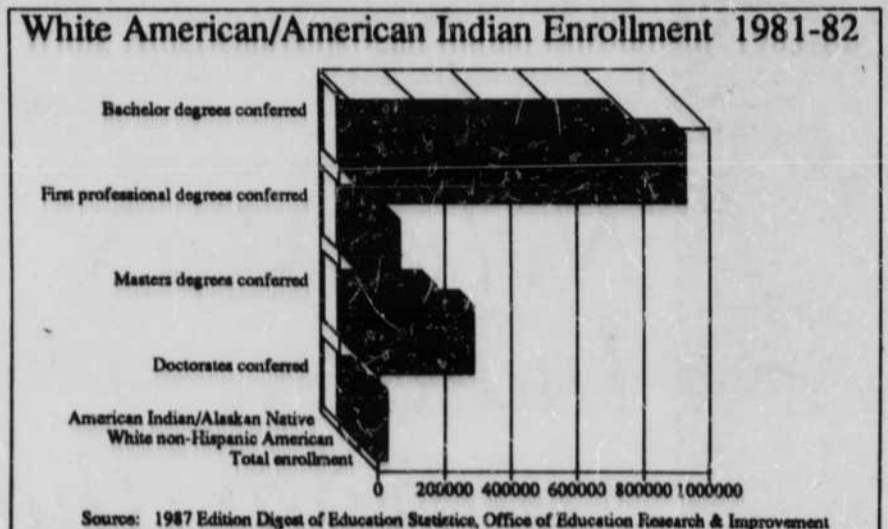
Whatever comes, at least Indian people will know who they are and have that protection, Ballard said.

"To those who want to be a member of the wide society—it's not a matter of giving up something, it's a matter of holding on to it as tight as you can."



Source: Charles Norman, American Indian Institute, University of Oklahoma

John Bruce/Daily Nebraskan



Source: 1987 Edition Digest of Education Statistics, Office of Education Research & Improvement

John Bruce/Daily Nebraskan

On the cover: Gabriel Long Soldier, a 4-year-old Oglala Sioux of Lincoln; and Viola Tyndall, a 73-year-old Omaha Indian who lives in Macy. Above: This hierarchy chart maps the priorities of the American Indian. To understand an Indian student's approach to education, people need to understand these values, according to many students and Indian teachers. Upper left: Winnebago kindergartner Martin Cleveland, left, whispers to friend Robert Galvin during lunch break at the Winnebago Public School.

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