

Standing in the Light: Culture as the Heart of Education

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Good Afternoon. I am honored to be among so many people whose life work is to build the hearts and minds of others through education. It is a privilege for me to share some of my thoughts and beliefs with you just as you have shared yours with me throughout the day.

I was born and raised on my home reservation, the Rosebud Reservation in what is now South Dakota. I am Sicangu Lakota as well as French and German and probably English or some type of Eastern European. My Lakota name is Wacinyanpi Win given to me by my paternal grandmother when I was about 16 – it means Woman they depend on. I am a wife, a mother, a grandmother and a lifelong educator.

For the last three and ½ years, I have served as President of Northwest Indian College, a regional tribal college serving tribes in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. In October, I was elected to my second term as President of AIHEC. I have spent the last twenty-five years working in tribal education at both the K-12 and higher education levels.

Since contact with Columbus, indigenous people on this continent have been subjected to systemic and deliberate attempts to destroy their cultural beliefs and ways of knowing through education. Beginning with seemingly benevolent efforts to Christianize native peoples but manifesting themselves in violent and often deadly acts, the colonizers of what are now the Americas did everything in their power to suppress indigenous populations and to force their integration into what we now refer to as western or mainstream society.

As a result of our experience, native people realize that teaching and learning are political acts. Teaching and learning are sources of and opportunities to engage political power that can have both intimate and far-reaching social and economic implications. Curriculum is not neutral – it is value-laden. The structure of schooling is not neutral – it too is laden with values and the practical application of belief systems.

Despite our experiences with genocide and colonization, as native people, we have survived. The context of that survival is, however, riddled with hardships and destruction. It is a dangerous survival because it requires constant vigilance to protect our unique identities and our nationalism. It is the context in which tribal colleges and universities and tribally controlled schools were established. Our elders, spiritual leaders and activists in the tribal identity movement gathered in the mid and late 1960's to capture the context of education and self-governance in our communities and to seek the means to address that context. Our own tribal education institutions emerged from those gatherings.

I would note as we recognize Dr. King's courage and sacrifice that our movement toward tribally controlled education occurred at the same time that the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's was sweeping across the country. We share a desire for access and opportunities with our brothers and sisters of color throughout the country and the world. We share the same desire for justice.

When the Navajo Nation established Navajo Community College what is now Dine College in 1969, they created a model for community-based, culturally grounded education. This model calls for educational institutions that are chartered by tribal governments and governed by tribal citizens. Most importantly, this model creates a venue for tribal people to learn in a sanctuary – a safe place where tribal identity and culture is honored, preserved and revitalized – a place where western skills that are needed in order to protect resources and provide employability skills are taught to native students.

Our founders – elders and spiritual leaders – wanted our tribally controlled institutions to build leaders who could successfully manage the human and natural resources of our communities. They also wanted leaders who knew themselves as indigenous people – who understand our unique ways of knowing the universe and of living relationships.

Many years ago, the late Ronnie Thiesz collaborated on a book with his dear friend, the late Severt Young Bear. This book *Standing in the Light* is the collaboration of two individuals from very different backgrounds and cultures who sought relationship with each other that resulted in the sharing of this book. Mr. Young Bear's premise is that those who stand in the center of the circle of Lakota life are those who are most healthy as human beings

and as Lakota people. He believed that those who stood outside the center looked with longing at those in the center and that those individuals wanted cultural identity and wellness for themselves. This teaching reflects the work of tribal colleges and universities. Our work is to help those who are standing outside of the center to come into the circle – to know who they are who – to live prosperously – to be fully native.

Culture is identity. It is the means by which we as native people have preserved our distinctiveness. Without an understanding of our culture, we are not fully human beings. We will always be missing some part of ourselves. Our native languages in particular carry the teachings and values of our cultures and through our work must be preserved and taught.

We recognize that the very methodologies of teaching can be a source of validation of our identity or a means to destroy it. Scholarship and research can promote western beliefs and practices or can serve the communal and tribal needs of our societies. What we say about how students learn can bring meaning to their educational experience or can diminish it.

For the tribal colleges and universities the translation of our teaching and learning experiences into the genre of scholarship is a relatively new process especially in light of the youth of our institutions – all of us are less than 40 years old and many are less than 20. I will try to name the ways that we have sought to validate our educational place in both tribal society and in the greater educational community.

NATIVE VOICE

Giving voice to our experiences – the naming of our knowledge is the heart of teaching and learning for us – just as it for you. We are diverse as tribal nations, we are nationalists in support of our own tribal self-governance, and we are dedicated to our survival as distinctive peoples for generations to come. Restoration of cultural practices in the context of contemporary society is our challenge. We attempt to meet this challenge through concerted efforts to preserve and teach native languages, to record tribal histories, to study and manage natural resources and to promote traditional and religious practices.

Much of education in American society today is devoted to economic ends and is founded on economic philosophies and expectations. Native

education on the other hand is devoted to the growth and development of human beings for whom economic opportunity is but one aspect of their lives.

One of the ways that we can promote scholarship of teaching and learning is to validate our traditional ways of knowing. This includes understanding the role of oral culture and narrative, the necessity of effective listening and discernment, and the place of reflection and prayer. Experiences and knowledge are shared through oral communication so our societies expect our children and adults to be good listeners and to be able to glean appropriate teachings from the narratives of others.

There are many scholars in our tribal communities. Experts on social systems, health, natural resource management, language, science, and architecture are present in our families. These are mostly individuals who are untrained in western methodologies. They are a tremendous resource for the classroom and the community.

NATIVE STUDIES IN THE ACADEMY

The treatment of native studies as a valid field in the academy is another one of our challenges. We believe that our native histories, philosophies, scientific and mathematical knowledge, literature and human understandings are all as valid and as substantiated as western scholarship. A student who takes a course of study that heavily emphasizes native studies is just as broadly knowledgeable and capable as a student whose education is grounded in western knowledge. Tribal colleges and universities historically require students and staff to take coursework in native studies and to participate fully in native community life.

Building native studies in the mainstream academy is even more challenging because native scholars and their allies are working in the enemy institution. These are institutions that are inherently dedicated to a greater public good that is not specifically devoted to the preservation of tribal societies.

ROLE OF RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Indigenous people are among the most studied people in the world. Mostly research has not benefited us because it is about us and not in support of improving our lives. We have only recently become more astute about our

ability to control and monitor research opportunities and experiences. With the support of our indigenous counterparts among Native Hawaiians and the Maori, we have begun to understand more fully the implications of the policies of colonization on our research experiences.

Now many tribes and TCUs have research policies and practices that more closely monitor the intent and use of research and which guard the sanctity of our tribal knowledge. These policies also alleviate the exploitation of tribal people for research purposes.

For tribal colleges, research must be community based and meaningful to the future of our children. In order for scholarship about teaching and learning to become a natural part of our tribal college experience, our faculty and administration must see it as a natural and necessary extension of our service to community.

STUDENT LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Native people are experts in experiential learning, learning by observation and practice, and in reflective learning. Our cultural teachings are grounded in this type of learning. Individuals who are honored for their creative and teaching gifts hold our knowledge base. Recently, we have begun to translate our cultural knowledge about teaching and learning into contemporary methodologies of data collection and analysis. We are practicing the use of our cultural competencies about education and human development using contemporary strategies such as surveys, reflective analysis and observation. Many of the methodologies of learning that are so popular today such as service learning are inherently comfortable in the tribal context of our institutions.

All of our institutions are engaged in analysis of student data. We are especially excited about the work that we are doing regarding student outcomes. Defining student outcomes for tribal colleges and universities is much broader than defining citizenship and civic participation and academic skills. It is defining what it means to be a tribal person in a contemporary context. This is very challenging. For example, we debate the influences of Christianity on our languages and our religious practices, we discuss the implications of being mixed bloods – either multi-tribal or of mixed race, we explore land policy and the land tenure issues associated with heir ship, we ponder what is traditional practice.

Finding a meaningful connection between the classroom and the daily lives of students is one of greatest challenges that faculty face. For tribal college faculty, that connection must be one that encourages the student to name their experiences and to see the opportunities for change. This connection must also validate and promote student tribal identity.

Many of the tribal colleges have made tremendous advances in the use of technology as a means of expanding access to education. We should examine how and if cultural knowledge and experiences can be transmitted in this manner and to what extent we value distance learning as a means of education in that context. Can our expectations of cultural outcomes and competencies for students be met if instruction is provided via the internet or interactive programming?

DEFINING RETENTION AND COMPLETION

In the early days of my tribal college experience, I remember being told that the very act of walking in the door at a tribal college was an act of courage. The historical educational experience of most tribal people was so damaging to both the individual and our societies that Indian educators acknowledged that our existence as tribal institutions was both an act of faith by our founders and a place of mystery for our people. This belief holds true still today. This is something that often hard for policy makers to understand. They demand data that supports their own notions of accountability. As a result TCUs are being forced to define what student retention and completion means to us. Like our colleagues in other Minority Serving Institutions and in many majority institutions, we are called upon to stretch extremely limited resources to serve the needs of individuals who are ill-equipped to pursue higher education.

Preparation for college has become one of the key roles of tribal colleges – with as much 90% of our students requiring one or more remedial courses. Academic readiness combined with economic disadvantages greatly challenge our ability to provide the kind of retention and completion statistics that the accountability czars in our legislatures and think tanks are interested in seeing.

At tribal colleges instructors are deeply engaged in student and community life. Their individual role in student retention through service as mentors, advisors and interpreters of American culture may make the difference in

whether or not a student stays in school. Our students cannot be invisible to us.

ACCREDITATION AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium supports policy and legislative initiatives on behalf of the tribal colleges and tribal education. One of our current goals is the examination of opportunities to create our own accreditation process in order to validate our own institutional intentions and the tribal philosophies that shape our services.

Because we are so challenged by the use of school structures that we did not create but which we attempt to modify to meet our tribal needs, Indian educators are also finding it necessary to question the design of the very systems that are currently in place in our communities including our tribal governments and our schools.

RESOURCEFULNESS AND READINESS

In order to promote scholarship of teaching and learning as an integrated part of our educational work, tribal colleges and tribal educators must do the following:

- 1) Continue to define more clearly the context of our work giving the evolving demographics and experiences of our students and their families
 - a. As our student demographics evolve – more younger students, more students choosing tribal colleges as their first choice, more tribal diversity – so must our methodologies.
 - b. Motivations of students change
 - c. More urban population, more transient
- 2) Actively use data and reflective practice to both validate tribal knowledge and to promote acquisition of new knowledge
 - a. Design valid research questions that can be answered by readily acquired data
 - b. Encourage sharing of data across institutional and collegiate boundaries
- 3) Build alliances and collaborations of mutual benefit but particularly focused on capacity building for our institutions

- a. Recognize that students of color are served across our geographic and social boundaries
- 4) Facilitate opportunities for faculty to study, research, pursue advanced degrees and participate in collaborations
 - a. Invest resources in faculty research
 - b. Promote expansion beyond community college framework
- 5) Promote undergraduate capacity for research at our institutions
- 6) Critically examine the institutional structures and processes that shape our educational institutions
 - a. Consider implications of accreditation standards

CLOSING REMARKS

The theme of this conference – Teaching and Learning for Empowerment – epitomizes the vision of the founders of tribal colleges and universities. A typical student at a tribal college is a single mother with an average age of 30. Our student ages range from 16 to 80. We are as diverse among the tribal colleges as among our tribal nations. A student at a tribal college is more likely to succeed with their higher education if they can stay on the reservation to go to school. A student who graduates from a tribal college is more likely to find employment and is more likely to pursue further education.

Among our universal tribal teachings is our belief in the impact of our decisions today on future generations – on the 7th generation. Students from tribal colleges become tribal presidents, school superintendents, tribal judges, teachers, nurses, and environmental stewards. They know themselves more fully and will be able to lead lives that will bring forth honor and opportunity to future generations.