

# **Applied Indigenous Studies at Northern Arizona University**

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Today, thanks to increasingly positive responses to tribal leadership and advocacy, more state and county governments are honoring claims to tribal sovereignty across the country. Governments are increasingly recognizing tribes as independent nations and are dealing with them on a government to government basis. In response to this positive development, tribal leaders have made the pursuit of education a top priority in their governance and administration because education is a vital force in their quest to strengthen tribal sovereignty. By fostering educational programs today that address social, economic, cultural and environmental challenges in Native American communities, tribal leaders will help create the next generation of leaders on reservations. Universities need to respond to this challenge, and Northern Arizona University has done so with Applied Indigenous Studies.

The core mission of Applied Indigenous Studies is to prepare students to assume leadership roles on reservations in the twenty-first century. In addition to providing students knowledge of tribal histories and cultures, federal policies, and contemporary reservation conditions, the curriculum provides students with tools and experience for contributing to their communities. The unit's students can gain skills in academic areas of importance (economic development, policy, and environmental studies, for instance) as well as learn how to use those skills on reservations. Should the Arizona Board of Regents approve departmental status (expected in January 2001), the new department be-

gins operation with the distinction of being the only such department located in an ecosystem-oriented interdisciplinary college. Locating Applied Indigenous Studies in the College of Ecosystem Science and Management at Northern Arizona University emphasizes the land-oriented and applied focus of the program. Both of the other units in the college, the School of Forestry and the Department of Geography and Public Planning, have interdisciplinary faculty who study landscapes, ecosystems, and human-nature interaction.

With 1,400 students representing at least 40 tribes, NAU has one of the largest enrollments of Native American students of any four-year university in the United States. The idea of establishing new majors in Applied Indigenous Studies at NAU made sense to many people. In January 2000, after two years of work by the Institute of Native Americans and a twenty-member faculty development committee, the Arizona Board of Regents approved the creation of two bachelor's degrees in Applied Indigenous Studies. The idea of a major with an applied focus originated with tribal leaders on Arizona's reservations in discussion with Terry Janis, Laurence Gishey and Al Henderson of NAU's Institute for Native Americans. The Advisory Board of the Institute—which consists of Arizona tribal leaders—refined the idea requesting, in addition to core courses that would prepare students for work on reservations, that the new major have particular emphases in the areas of concern to tribal communities: economic development, environmental management, policy formation, and education.

In the Fall of 1998, President Clara Lovett presented the idea of planning for a new major to the University community at a public forum. The Regents granted planning authority, and during 1999 an interdisciplinary committee chaired by Regents' Professor Curtis Hinsley designed the curriculum. The committee proposed that the new major retain the AIS initials of the original proposal for an American Indian Studies major, but the title was changed to Applied Indigenous Studies for two reasons. First, the curriculum is intended to address applications of university knowledge as well as traditional knowledge to reservation conditions—hence “applied.” Second, the context of American reservations has become global; not only have American Indians involved the United Nations in their issues, but also ties to other indigenous peoples of the world have fortunately increased. “Indigenous Peoples” is the most general terminology for describing the original inhabitants of much of the world's land. Expansion of the old world economy—colonialism in the nineteenth century—has become globalization in the twenty-first century.

In the Fall of 1999, the faculty committee presented its proposed curriculum to the University Curriculum Committee, and after review and improvements as a result of those discussions, the proposal went to the Regents, which approved the proposal. The new majors (B. S. and B. A.) will be the usual size, 45 credits, with students able to choose a minor in another field or to undertake one of three “certificates” in order to expand and apply their knowledge base. Each of the certificates combines core courses to address the concerns expressed

by tribal leaders: economic development, policy and environment. Similar certificates are under development in education, health care delivery and museum studies.

After Regents' approval, economist Dean Smith chaired a smaller steering committee that continued to work on developing the majors. In the summer of 2000, the new majors were located in the College of Ecosystem Science and Management with four faculty. Professors Devon Mihesuah and Curtis Hinsley have full-time appointments, Dean Smith has a half-time appointment, and Ronald Trosper has a part-time appointment as interim head of the new unit.

Because Devon Mihesuah is editor of the *American Indian Quarterly*, students are easily exposed to contemporary debates in the field as well as to questions of academic communication and journalism. The editorial office of the *Quarterly* is in Applied Indigenous Studies, with budgetary support from the University.

Course offerings are currently being built from the freshman and sophomore years forward. The first two years contain courses that address general knowledge of North American indigenous cultural histories, artistic expression, current conditions, and the global legacies of colonial domination and resistance. In the junior and senior years, new courses directly relate to reservation issues. An internship is offered between the junior and senior years, in which students work on reservations for tribal government, for private enterprise, or for other reservation organizations. Internships will also exist in off-reservation organizations that work with tribes. Among the topics in the junior year writing course, students write about their anticipated activities in an internship. The junior year course also addresses grant preparation and other writing skills relevant to reservations. The senior year capstone courses will include reflection upon the lessons learned during the internship experience. They will also train students in strategic planning and special issues that relate to management on reservations. In these ways the core courses of the major will prepare students directly for reservation employment. The list of AIS core courses includes:

- AIS 101 Introduction to Indigenous Studies
- AIS 201 American Indian Expression
- AIS 202 Roots of Federal Indian Policy
- AIS 204 Indigenous-State Relations: Comparative Global Contexts
- AIS 210 American Indian Tribal Governments
- AIS 301 Communication Skills for Applied Indigenous Studies
- AIS 404 Senior Seminar in Tribal Management
- AIS 408 Fieldwork Experience
- AIS 490 Strategic Planning for Indigenous Nations

The department is moving quickly to implement the courses needed by the

new degrees. The department offers a Bachelor of Science, a Bachelor of Arts, and a Minor in Applied Indigenous Studies. It will also administer the Interdisciplinary Minor in Native American Studies. The academic degree requirements are as follows:

*Bachelor of Science in Applied Indigenous Studies.* Bachelor of Science requirements total 45 credit hours, consisting of 27 credit hours of specified AIS courses; one 3-hour research methods course to be chosen with advisor approval; and 15 credit hours of electives from a menu of options. Minor/Certificate requirements will vary between 18 and 27 credit hours. Three AIS certificate options are currently environmental studies, policy analysis and administration, and economic development. Two more, in education and health, are under construction; we expect to develop others as well. The student is encouraged to take one of these professionally oriented certificate options, but may also choose another minor.

*Bachelor of Arts in Applied Indigenous Studies.* The Bachelor of Arts degree requires 42 credit hours total, distributed similarly as the B.S. requirement; plus 16 credit hours of language. Minor/Certificate requirements will vary between 18-27 credit hours and are the same as the B.S. degree requirements.

*Minor in Applied Indigenous Studies.* The minor in AIS consists of some of the core courses for the two bachelor's degrees and electives selected from a short list of courses relevant to tribal administration. It will be offered to give students enrolled in majors in other departments the ability to include tribal implementation courses in their preparation for graduation. This minor will be offered in the Spring semester of 2001.

*Interdisciplinary Minor in Native American Studies.* The interdisciplinary minor in Native American Studies emphasizes courses in history and culture. It has existed at NAU for many years. The minor is being modified to distinguish it from the minor in Applied Indigenous Studies. The modified minor will first be offered in the Spring semester of 2001.

*Certificate in Applied Indigenous Economic Development.* For this certificate, students take courses in economics, accounting, finance, management and marketing. The courses provide a core introduction to reservation economic development and include a course specifically addressing reservation issues.

*Certificate in Applied Indigenous Environmental Studies.* To complete this certificate, students take the core courses in environmental science, which emphasize ecology and the study of ecological processes. Students also take courses in traditional ecological knowledge, the impact of culture on environmental management, and environmental policy.

*Certificate in Applied Indigenous Policy Administration.* Core courses in this certificate introduce students to the American political system and the place of tribal government in that system. Students have electives which allow them to focus learning upon federal, state or local policy issues, with emphasis

on environmental policy and criminal justice if desired.

In order for the program to succeed in preparing students for leadership roles on reservations, AIS must develop a curriculum that addresses the very real challenges that tribal leaders face in Native American communities. The unit seeks funding for a visiting tribal elders and leaders program, in which students will learn first hand from current leaders the different ways in which each tribe addresses the tension between its traditions and the pressures of the modern world.

With the wisdom and guidance of visiting elders, Applied Indigenous Studies will be able to incorporate vital Native American traditions in the curriculum and address issues from a perspective that faculty cannot provide. By having direct contact with tribal leaders, students will receive invaluable insights into the challenges that tribes face and will learn about innovative solutions. Tribal leaders and elders will also serve as a valuable resource for professors teaching courses in related fields, particularly those courses on the list of electives for the majors.

The program attracted six students as majors in its first semester of operation, all of whom are Indians. As the course offerings grow and students learn about it, the major should increase and become attractive to Indian students. The goal is to reach a level of one hundred majors within five years. At least two new faculty members will be needed to address this size. Because of the continuing support of Northern Arizona University and the College of Ecosystem and Science and Management, this new program should grow rapidly.

### Notes

1. This essay summarizes the work and thought of many people at Northern Arizona University. I would like to thank them all for help in setting up the new program (anticipated to be a department in January, 2001) and members of the faculty for assistance in writing this.