

The Native American Studies Program at The University of Oklahoma

Clara Sue Kidwell

The Native American Studies (NAS) program at the University of Oklahoma was approved by the State Regents for Higher Education in January of 1994. It is an interdisciplinary, B.A. degree program with a liberal arts orientation and a strong emphasis on issues of contemporary American Indian policy. The goal of the program is to teach students to communicate clearly and effectively in writing and speaking, to understand how value systems operate in different cultures, to appreciate the aesthetic qualities in Indian life, to examine the roots of conflict and resolution in human history, to appreciate the unique status of American Indian tribes as nations with certain sovereign powers within the boundaries of the United States, and to understand the importance of language as a means of cultural expression.

The program's curriculum includes courses drawn from the English, History, Anthropology, Art History, and Music departments together with a group of courses offered under the NAS program rubric. The NAS courses include Tribal Sovereignty, Tribal Educational Policy, and Tribal Economic Development.

The program has three full-time staff members: Dr. Clara Sue Kidwell (Chippewa/Choctaw) is the Director, Dr. Barbara Hobson (Comanche) is Assistant Director, and Dr. Jerry Bread (Kiowa/Cherokee) is Outreach Coordinator. In addition to administrative responsibilities they also teach classes under the NAS rubric. The program has only one part time faculty line, held by nationally known Cheyenne artist Edgar Heap of Birds, who has a joint appointment with the School of Art. Because most of the courses that comprise the NAS major are taught in other academic departments, the program's success depends upon a close and cooperative working relationship with faculty and chairs in the departments.

The relative lateness of the program's entry into the university's curriculum is interesting in a state which has consistently had the highest or second highest numerical population of American Indians in the country according to U.S. Census statistics, and which indeed had the prospect of being an all-Indian state at times in American history. Currently the state is home to 39 federally recognized tribes. In 1929, Joseph Brandt, first editor of the University of Oklahoma Press, suggested to William Bizzell, University president, that an American Institute of Indian Civilization be created. He envisioned a library of Indian materials, annual conferences on Indian policy, and academic courses on Indian art, history, and culture.¹ Five young Kiowa men had already entered the School of Art under the mentorship of the school's founder, Oscar Jacobson, in 1926. Jacobson would make them internationally famous by arranging for their work to be exhibited in an exhibition in Prague, Czechoslovakia.²

Bizzell continued his efforts to establish an institute, and in 1931 he wrote to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and to members of the Oklahoma Congressional delegation. The BIA was not receptive, but some of the congressmen introduced bills to fund the institute and a special Indian college. Because the idea of a special college for Indian students went against the assimilationist policies of the BIA, the bills died, and by 1934, when John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, reversed the assimilationist policy, he objected to favoring one university over any others. Because of prevailing federal Indian policies, OU remained without an Indian studies program.³

A sporadic attempt at a program happened in the mid-1970's, but without any funding and only a volunteer half-time director, the program essentially remained one in name only. It was not until 1994 that Drs. Bread and Hobson and Professor Phil Lujan in the Communications Department, with the encouragement and support of Dr. David Young, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (1992-95), put together the proposal for the Native American Studies major that was approved by the regents. Young traveled to meetings with a number of tribal council members in the state, and he gave partial financial support to the Native language classes, which were primarily funded by tuition generated through the College of Continuing Education on the OU campus. He also authorized the position and search for a permanent director of the Native American Studies program.

The current program certainly does not constitute an exclusively Indian enclave within the University. There are approximately 50 NAS majors a semester, and usually between 10 and 20 percent of those are non-Indians. One NAS class, Native American Philosophy, meets a university wide general education requirement and has an enrollment limit of 50 students, the majority of whom are non-Indian.

The strengths of the Native American Studies program are in the number and diversity of the faculty who teach classes that can be used to support the major. Thirty-two current members of the OU faculty have research interests in Native American topics. Of those, 11 are American Indians. The Departments of

English, History, Art/Art History, and Anthropology, are beginning to capitalize on reputations for scholarship in Native topics established at earlier times in the University's history by scholars such as Alan Velie and Geary Hobson (English), Arrell Gibson, Donald Berthrong (History), Oscar Jacobson (Art), and Morris Opler (Anthropology). The University has been able to attract a cadre of younger scholars such as Circe Sturm (Anthropology), Janet McAdams and Robert Warrior (English), Warren Metcalf (History), Paula Conlon (Music), Mary Jo Watson (Art History) and James Treat (Honors College), who are establishing national reputations in Native literary studies, studies of Indian history, art history, and anthropology.

A second strength of the program is the number of Native languages taught on the campus. At the present time, the Anthropology and Native American Studies cross-list courses in Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek/Seminole, and Kiowa, which meet the university-wide language requirement. The classes are heavily subscribed by non-Indian students. The language initiative began in 1992 with a grant from the Oklahoma Historical Society for a research project on language preservation in the state. The primary researcher on the project, Dr. Alice Anderton, had done work on the Comanche language and initiated classes in that language on the campus. By the fall of 1995 the four languages currently offered were in place.

Initially the language courses were offered through the College of Continuing Education on tuition driven funding, with supplemental funds provided on an ad hoc basis by Dean Young. Despite initial low enrollments and cancellations, the courses are now on a firm financial footing, and the Native speakers who teach them are regularly paid out of university instructional funds. The courses are administered through the Anthropology Department but are cross-listed under the Native American Studies rubric. Approximately 150 students a semester are enrolled in the language courses.

A third strength of the program is the connection to tribal communities. With 39 federally recognized tribes in the state of Oklahoma, faculty has access to community members as resource people. The Native language courses are staffed by Native speakers. The Native American Music class regularly has Native dancers, singers, and musicians. The Tribal Economic Development class can hear from tribal chairs and council members. These are only two ways in which the program has been able to utilize Native expertise as part of its curriculum.

The program also serves its Native constituency by hosting an annual conference on tribal governance. The first conference dealt with issues in American Indian higher education; the second, with tribal economic development, and the third with writing tribal constitutions. Future topics include government-to-government relationships and language preservation efforts. The conference series is intended to build the program's reputation as an educational resource for tribal communities in the state and potentially for a national audience. Each conference has featured several nationally known figures who bring a broad

perspective to issues of policy and tribal governance. A fourth strength of the program is a \$300,000 endowment from the Coca Cola Foundation funded in 1998 to support the development of a project to encourage middle school and junior high American Indian students to pursue careers in mathematics and science. The project, now named the American Indian Math and Science Society (AIMS), provides funds to eight schools in small towns in Oklahoma for enrichment activities in the form of science clubs. The clubs convene on the OU campus for an annual science fair, and winners in the various categories at the fair then participate in a one-week summer residential program on the campus. Because it has on-going funding from the endowment, the project will be able to track students in their progress in mathematics and science courses and, we hope, influence their decisions concerning college attendance and selection of majors.

A fifth strength of the program is in the student body at the University of Oklahoma, which in the 2000-2001 academic year numbers 1,466 self-identified Native American students. The State Regents established a policy requiring that students who receive special services from the University on the basis of Indian identity must produce a tribal membership card or letter from a tribal official to verify their Indian identity, and during the 2000-2001 academic year a total of 414 students had gone through the verification process.

The Native American students constitute a pool of potential leaders in American Indian communities. Although many have little if any direct connection with tribal communities, those who do may become interested in the operations of tribal governments if they take NAS classes. The Tribal Sovereignty class (NAS 4803) generally draws around twenty students, NAS majors and non-majors, predominantly but not exclusive American Indian, who learn about contemporary issues of sovereignty confronting tribes. The senior capstone class, (NAS 4013) required of all NAS majors, includes field trips to tribal offices where students are able to interact directly with officials and staff members and to learn about the day-to-day operations of governments. As a result of a recent revision in the curriculum, all majors will be required to do an internship in which they work with a tribal community or an organization that serves American Indian people. In the past, when the internship was an option, placements were made with such organizations as the Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma Indian Legal Services, the American Indian Physicians Association, Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission, the Indian Education Office of the Oklahoma City Public Schools, and Jacobson House Native Art Center.

As of the Spring of 2000, the Native American Studies program had graduated 56 majors. A number have gone on to graduate programs in law, public administration, library science, and Native American Studies. Several are currently working for organizations that serve American Indians in various ways. The program has contributed to the pool of knowledgeable individuals who can assume leadership roles in Indian communities and service organizations in the future.

Although the Native American Studies program at the University of Oklahoma is of relatively recent origin, its development has been steady. The curriculum reflects current scholarship and has a significant focus on contemporary issues. Although the number of majors has not grown significantly over the past four years, it remains steady, with between six and eight graduates per year. Above all, however, the creation of the program in 1994 marked the first acknowledgement by the University that diverse elements of scholarship: literary, anthropological, historical, and artistic could comprise an intellectually coherent curriculum under the rubric of Native American Studies.

Notes

1. Steven Crum. "Bizzell and Brandt: Pioneers in Indian Studies 1929-1937," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Fall 1988), p. 179.
2. Dorothy Dunn. *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Areas*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), pp. 218-21.
3. Crum, pp. 182-86.