

## **First Nations Center at the University of Wisconsin-Superior**

**Gary Johnson**

The First Nations Center, formerly the Center for American Indian Studies, at the University of Wisconsin-Superior (UWS) was born out of a desire to increase cultural awareness of American Indian people, primarily the Anishenabe (Ojibway) of northern Wisconsin. Legislation was passed by the state of Wisconsin following racial violence in the early 1980s at boat landings in northern Wisconsin as Anishenabe spear fishers exercised federally affirmed treaty rights. The state of Wisconsin believed that education was the key to bringing an end to this racially motivated violence. The philosophy was that if non-Indian Americans knew more about American Indian cultures, particularly Wisconsin Indian culture, misunderstandings regarding treaty rights, and the racist behavior that was giving northern Wisconsin a bad reputation and impeding tourism, would stop.

The legislation that followed, referred to as Act 31, was passed in August of 1989 and required Wisconsin public schools teach about American Indian culture, history, sovereignty, and treaty rights twice in elementary school and once in high school. Another part of the legislation dealt with teacher preparation and required that all teachers take a compulsory class to prepare them to teach the above-mentioned material.

It was from this climate of increased cultural awareness that the idea for the First Nations Center arose. In 1987, the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council submitted a report to the University of Wisconsin System documenting the educational needs of American Indians. The UWS System responded to this report with the

Design for Diversity program aimed at promoting degree completion by minority students and increasing the number of minority faculty and staff. In late 1989, the Chancellor Terry McTaggart formed an advisory board of educational leaders from area reservations and members of the University staff.

Mr. Rob Goslin was hired as the Director/Coordinator of Indian Student Services along with Mr. John Anderson and Mr. Gary Johnson who were hired to fill the two full-time tenure track positions. Mr. Anderson filled the on campus faculty position while Mr. Johnson's position was split between Lac Courte Oreille Community College (LCOOCC) and UWS. A half time secretary was also hired for the program.

In January 1991, Mr. Anderson resigned and Ms. Cladyee Nahbenayash, an adjunct instructor, filled his position in the summer of that year. Mr. Goslin resigned in the summer of 1991 and his position remained unfilled for most of the next academic year until Mr. Johnson filled it. After consulting with the administration, Mr. Johnson split the Director and Coordinator into two positions with each position having a half-time tenured faculty position. Mr. Chip Beal filled this second position in the fall of 1992.

After consultation with university administration, the director decided that the Center should have a three-fold purpose. First, the Center would provide a program of instruction about Native Americans so that general knowledge and understanding regarding Native Americans could be increased. Second, the Center was to recruit and retain Native American students to higher education and finally, the Center was to provide assistance to area tribes for accessing higher education.

The focus of the Center during the early years was to establish a program of study that would lead to a minor in Indian Studies. The courses would be both developed and taught by Native Americans. Planning in the early stages of the Center was inconsistent, mainly due to turnover in the Center's staff, changes in administration of the Center and its chain of command, and a structural reorganization of the University. Although an Advisory Board had been organized early on, it became dormant due to the reorganization and lack of continuity in the Center.

To assist with direction, the Center reorganized the dormant advisory board with the Center's director at its head and sought to include input from the university administration, the Center, students, Lac Courte Oreille Community College, and representatives from the reservations within the service region of the University. Each member of the board was responsible for gathering input and reporting back to his/her constituents.

The Board consisted of:

Gary W. Johnson, Director, Center for American Indian Studies-UWS  
Nancy Merrill, Dean, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College  
Chip Beal, Indian Student Services Coordinator, University of Wisconsin-Superior

Dana Jackson, Education Director, Bad River Ojibway Reservation  
David Merrill, Education Director, St. Croix Ojibway Reservation  
Christine Jackson, Home School Coordinator, Bad River Ojibway reservation  
Ernestine Rodriquez, Education Officer, Lac Du Flambeau Ojibway reservation  
Art Tainter, Home School Coordinator, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibway reservation  
Gloria Toivola, Dean-College of Professional Studies, University of Wisconsin-Superior

Additionally, all Tribal Chairs of the tribes within the service region were invited to send a representative of their choosing.

The first task of the advisory board was to write a mission statement for the Center and purpose statements that could be used in creating objectives. The advisory board was asked to seek out what their representatives wanted in terms of the Center's activities in the three areas the Center would be serving the university, student, and community. This material was then brought back to the board and the process of writing a mission statement with purpose statements began.

In order to provide the best direction for the Center, the following mission and purpose statements were developed:

The American Indian Studies Center seeks to promote an understanding and awareness of Indian people through a curriculum in American Indian Studies that leads to a minor. The program provides the opportunity for American Indians and non-Indians alike to increase their knowledge of the origin of American Indian people in terms of history, culture, and philosophy.

The differences between American Indians and non-Indians will be examined through courses on culture and philosophy in order to gain a true understanding of who American Indians are. Stereotypes will be addressed through history courses with the goal of students gaining an appreciation of Indian people and their contributions to the world. Other courses will provide opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding of the role of American Indians in the cultural development of the world.

As a part of its mission, the Center will aid in the retention of American Indian students through a minor in Indian Studies and a support system that is comprised of a student organization and a counselor geared toward American Indians. The Center will also become an educational resource for the northern Wisconsin region for educational pursuits by providing resources such as print and audio-visual media resources about Native Americans, along with a resource of speakers and experts on American Indian issues.

Initially, the Center focused on developing a minor in American Indian Studies. Now, the Center offers a 24 credit minor in American Indian Studies that

has since been recognized by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction as a licensable teaching minor for elementary education majors. The required courses are in Ojibwe Language, Survey of American Indian Culture, Introduction to Tribal Government, Spiritual Values and Beliefs, and American Indian History. To complete the minor, the First Nations Center offers courses in Ojibwe Culture, American Indian Literature, American Indian Law, Contemporary Issues in American Indian Society, Historical Foundation of American Indian Education, Study of American Indian Women, and Counseling the American Indian. The emphasis of these courses has been that they are designed and delivered by American Indian faculty and that the course of study would be under the control of the Center rather than a cross disciplined approach. The Center has also brought a liberal arts approach to the First Nations field of study. Many of the courses are a part of the General Education program at the university and many of the classes have been cross-listed with other departments.

Another major thrust of the Center has been Student Services. At the UWS, a bit of Indian Country has been established. Within the building in which the faculty reside, there is a place devoted to the American Indian Student Organization (AISO), called the American Indian Resource Center. This resource center provides a place that reflects the culture of the students as a part of the goal to ease the transition from home to the university. Here, the students have a place to relax, study, and hang out with other students in a place near the American Indian faculty members. The American Indian Student Organization has become one of the strongest student organizations on campus and provides an outlet for American Indian students to express their culture or learn about it. Non-Indian membership is also promoted within the organization to develop a sense of diversity among students and for the organization to be a role model for cultural understanding. The organization under the direction of the Center's Director sponsors many cultural activities throughout the year to bridge the cultural awareness gap. It provides a platform for students to express their culture or, in some cases, to learn it and develop pride in who they are and where they come from. UWS boasts the highest percentage of American Indian students in the state university system and also the best retention rate for those students. The First Nations Center and AISO are highly visible parts of campus life and provide leadership in diversity, which in turn helps student to feel that they are a part of the university. The Center tries to provide the windows and mirrors that promote a positive self-image for American Indian students that enable them to avoid feeling like a visitor in someone's house.

The Center has a third goal and that is to provide outreach services. It thus serves as a link between the university and Indian country. Through its staff, it has many contacts on the reservations in our service region and can facilitate communication between the American Indian community and UWS. The Center tries to bring educational needs to the proper outlet at the university and facilitate communication and understanding. It has been instrumental in the development

of an articulation agreement between the university and Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibway Community College (LCOOCC), a tribally controlled community college on the Lac Courte Oreilles reservation near Hayward. Through this agreement, anyone who obtains an associate degree from LCOOCC can transfer to UWS and have all of their general education requirements taken care of and can move directly into a degree program. The First Nations Center also assisted in establishing a 2+2 program with the Social Work program at UWS and LCOOCC in which the students begin their program at LCOOCC and finish at UWS. A similar program in Teacher Education in which the majority of the course will be delivered at LCOOCC is being developed.

Some recent developments include a name change from the Center for American Indian Studies to the First Nations Center. Center for American Indian Studies was an inherited name that never quite rolled off the tongue correctly. The Center's staff thus decided they wanted to change it to something that reflected who they were and that could also be used as a teaching tool. First Nations is a term used in Canada and, being so close to Canada, it seemed to make sense to borrow it. It also describes who American Indians are and where we come from philosophically, hence the name change and its recognition from the state. The Center also now boasts three faculty members with tenure and the rank of associate and assistant professor. The Center has integrated into the university structure and has a permanent home. Much of the early instability has been done away with. The Center has committed staff members who each has over ten years of service to the Center and UWS. It graduates approximately 10 students a year from the program and has a role of facilitator between the reservations and the university that is depended on. The First Nations Center has come a long way since its inception in the late 1980s, and it has a long list of accomplishments to show. The staff takes a lot of pride in the students they have helped and the cultural awareness and understanding that they have provided to its service region. Living on the tip of Lake Superior and in the Center of Indian Country, the First Nations Center of the University of Wisconsin-Superior has found its niche.