

# **From Activism to Academics: The Evolution of American Indian Studies at San Francisco State 1968-2001**

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The San Francisco Bay area is the aboriginal home to the Costanoan or Ohlone peoples. However, the American Indian heritage of this region offers a unique history of activism, unity and development. Political and social issues surrounding American Indian heritage reached a boiling point for activism in the late 1960's. The founding of the American Indian Studies Department at San Francisco State University and the American Indian occupation at Alcatraz Island had a profound impact on the future of political and social struggles of American Indians throughout the United States. A group of San Francisco State University Students (SFSU) led by Richard Oakes (Mohawk) and University of California-Berkeley (UCB) students, led by La Nada Boyer (Shoshone Bannock) and other community and student activists occupied the 12-acre Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay on November 20, 1969 under the name of "Indians of All Tribes." The students and protestors issued a proclamation stating plans to develop American Indian organizations and centers on Alcatraz Island.

"We the Native Americans, reclaim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians...a center for Native American Studies, and American Indian spiritual center, and Indian center of ecology, and Indian training school and an American Indian museum."<sup>1</sup>

The 19-month occupation catapulted a group of students onto the world stage and called attention to the social and political status of American Indians. The federal government's long standing history of moral and legal injustice against American Indians was now in every home, for all Americans to view.

San Francisco State University (SFSU) is situated in a unique location in a large urban city, which is also home to a large urban American Indian population. The vast majority of the American Indians living in the Bay area after World War II came from tribes outside of California. During the last half of the twentieth century, thousands of reservation Indians moved from their homes into the cities seeking employment and better opportunities. This was a difficult move which forced Indians to create a new sense of identity while adjusting to an urban community.<sup>2</sup> Although many American Indians came to cities and the Bay area for work in war related industries, most came as a result of the federal government's termination program. The termination policy (H.R. 108, 1953) literally "can be taken to mean that a terminated tribe no longer exists as a cultural legal entity."<sup>3</sup> In addition to the legal status of tribal governments and the termination of their members, tribal lands were divided among tribal members and became taxable private property. In an attempt to promote a positive spin to the termination era, the federal government began promoting its relocation program. The relocation program offered reservation Indians financial assistance in relocating to pre-determined urban locations. Some of the cities offered in the federal relocation program included Denver, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and Cleveland. Of the eight-target city locations, three were located in the bay area—San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose. The urbanization and expansion of the Indian presence grew in urban cities. In California, after 18 years of relocation the numbers of California's urban Indians announced to the country that California had been a place where Indians began to institute themselves in an urban presence. By 1970, 76 percent of the 88,263 Indians in California resided in cities.<sup>4</sup>

Urban Indians found themselves scattered among poor neighborhoods throughout the Bay area. These new relocatees found that the experiences of relocation did not meet the propaganda vigorously promoted by the relocation program. Problems began to arise and Indians began to establish organizations to deal with the common needs and concerns that this new urban Indian population began to face. Solidarity was found through common bouts with racism and discrimination. A multi-tribal identity began to emerge and with that came the formation of Indian centers, churches, associations, and student groups. In spite of a small urban Indian population in the Bay area this was a focal point in the civil rights struggle that would eventually lead to growing activism among American Indians. In 1963, the federal government discontinued the use of Alcatraz as a federal penitentiary and on March 9, 1964, five Sioux Indians landed on the abandoned federal prison at Alcatraz Island. Allen Cottier, President of the American Indian Council, organized the event and the group offered

the federal government 47 cents per acre for title to the island. Although they were immediately ejected, the fire had been lit.

Events occurring in the Bay area's principal public universities under newly enacted educational opportunity programs provided an opportunity for American Indians to attend UCB and SFSU. The students tended to be older and married with families. Lehman Brightman, a Sioux and Creek educator, was hired in the fall of 1968 at UCB to organize a Native American Indian Studies Program. Lee's program was modeled after that of SFSU, which established the first Native American Studies program in the nation.<sup>5</sup>

American Indian students became encouraged by the Third World Liberation Front Strike leaders, who had challenged San Francisco State University's administration. They stated, "We have decided to fuse ourselves with the masses of Third World people, who are the majority of the world's peoples, to create, through struggle, a new humanity...and within that context collectively control our own destinies."<sup>6</sup> Inspired by the strike, an adamant group of American Indian students from various tribes began to organize. American Indian students at SFSU established the Student Council of American Natives (SCAN). This organization created a support mechanism in which Native students could engage in support and dialogue amongst each other as well as discuss their concerns as urban Indians. SCAN later became Student Council of Inter-tribal Nations (SKINS). SKINS led by Richard Oakes, Allen Miller (Seminole), Ror Lickers (Seneca), Mickey Gemmill (Pit River Tribe), and Gerald Sam (Round Valley) later became instrumental in the occupation of Alcatraz. Faculty advisors for the group were Dr. Jim Hirabayashi (first dean of the College of Ethnic Studies) and Dr. Luis Kemnitzer, professor of Anthropology who taught the first course in American Indian Studies at SFSU. UCB American Indian students led by Brightman began publishing a newspaper attacking the Bureau of Indian Affairs and anti-Indian racism in general. American Indian students at UCB also had an organization which was formed in 1968 and called the United Native Americans (UNA), led by Brightman. UNA also had an inter-tribal focus and promoted self-determination among American Indians.<sup>7</sup> Student leaders on the Berkeley campus began to assert their concerns. LaNada Boyer assisted UCB students in coordinating with the SFSU Student leaders, wherein they planned to develop a role for student activism among the growing tide of social and political unrest enveloping society. Indian power was born.

"A tangible feeling of skepticism and consternation with the leadership of the nation and state poured forth from the University of California at Berkeley, site of the free speech movement and a large number of protests throughout the decade. If San Francisco was the great bastion of liberalism in the 1960's, then Berkeley, just across the bay, had to be the inner sanctum for student revolutionaries."<sup>8</sup>

On November 9, 1969, a group of 14 Indian college students occupied the Island for 19 hours. Like the first attempt, a justification for the seizure was offered based on terms of the Fort Laramie treaty of 1868, which permitted any male Indian over the age of 18 whose tribe was a party to the treaty, to file for a homestead on government land.<sup>9</sup> It was obvious that the document did not refer to California but to Northern Plains land. Nevertheless, its provision resonated among the inter-tribal group of Indians who had been witnesses and victims of federal seizure of Indian lands to establish national parks, defense bombing ranges, and other non-Indian locations. The students, encouraged by the momentum, traveled to UCLA in mid-November to seek recruits among the large American Indian student population in the newly established program. About 41 Indian students and one professor, Edward D. Castillo, volunteered to join the campaign.<sup>10</sup> On the evening of November 20, 1969, about 78 American Indians (mostly college students from UCB, UCLA and SFSU) boarded boats in Sausalito for a midnight trip to the island.

Energized by the Third World Strike and the activism surrounding the students, American Indian students began to demand that courses be offered that were relevant to American Indians. Students demanded courses on Indian history as told by Indians and that the universities hire American Indian instructors. Luis Kemnitzer, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at SFSU was among SFSU faculty who went on strike in support of the student-run Third World Liberation Front Strike in 1968. In 1969, he taught the first Native American studies course at SFSU.

With the birth of American Indian Studies, students were able to expand their knowledge of American Indian historical and contemporary issues. In addition, non-Indian students would also benefit from the opportunity to learn about the relationship of American Indians to the United States. Housed in the only College of Ethnic Studies in the country, the Department of American Indian Studies at SFSU serves both the American Indian and non-Indian community by offering a dynamic set of courses that engage students to exchange ideas, thoughts and discussions which can lead to positive changes for all.

The critical role that SFSU students played in the "Red Power Movement" left a legacy on the campus, which encouraged an ongoing commitment to education and community service. Given the unique location of SFSU and the demography which surrounds it, SFSU is significant to the area of American Indian Studies. Through the years many unique individuals have studied or taught in the department of American Indian Studies. Students at SFSU such as Wilma Mankiller (Hall of Fame, SFSU), former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, to current adjunct faculty Joseph Myers (Pomo) Director of the National Indian Justice Center, offer a uniqueness not usually located in a single university. Over the years, the Department of American Indian Studies at SFSU has seen a number of faculty pass through its halls such as Bea Medicine, Barney Hoehner, Paula Gunn Allen, Vernon Ketcheshawno, Carol Lee Sanchez, Betty Parent (first tenure-track appointment), Ben Chavis (second tenure-track), Patrick

Guillory, Inez Hernandez-Avila, Dennis Jennings, Denny Leonard, Joseph Myers, Nicole Myers, Winona Simms. Dr. Betty Parent has been the only tenured American Indian Studies professor at SFSU. She retired in January 2001 after 21 years of service. In addition, Dr. Parent served as department chair for 14 years (1980 - 1994).

During the 1980's, the department established a minor and faculty worked on stabilizing the core course curriculum. AIS courses became combined with general education requirements. This development helped establish the AIS department as an attractive department for students to complete their general education requirements. Because general education requirements are offered with many of our courses, the department consistently meets and often exceeds its target enrollment with several of the courses becoming so in demand that three sessions of a course may be offered each semester. For example, *AIS 205 American Indians and U.S. Laws*, a course which fulfills the California and United States government requirement, exceeds the demand and is offered at least three times per semester. This course covers the legal history that has developed between the earliest settlers and the existing peoples of the American continent, including the legal evolution of tribal sovereignty and federal policies passed pursuant to the federal tribal trust relationship.

During the 1990's curriculum development became the focus of the department. New courses were developed such as *AIS 235 American Indians Images and Issues in the Mass Media* which deals with recurring images and treatment of American Indians, especially in film, television, advertising, popular literature, and commercial arts. The course also examines the cultural, economic, social, and political forces that influence image and artistic expression. AIS currently offers 28 courses including a graduate seminar entitled *AIS 701 Seminar in American Indian Studies*. The course covers issues in the study of American Indians such as understanding Indian tribes and nations as sovereign political entities, as well as political, economic, and social developments of self-determination and its implications for Indian tribes. The following is a listing of some of the courses offered in the department:

*AIS 110 Critical Thinking and the American Indian Experience (GE)*, *AIS 150 American Indian History in the United States (GE)*, *AIS 160 Survey of Native California*, *AIS 162 American Indian Oral Literature*, *AIS 205 American Indians and U.S. Laws (GE)*, *AIS 214 Second Year Written Composition: American Indian Studies (GE)*, *AIS 220 American Indian Music (GE)*, *AIS 225 American Indian Art (GE)*, *AIS 235 American Indians: Image and Issues in the Mass Media (GE)*, *AIS 310 American Indian Religion and Philosophy (GE)*, *AIS 360 Modern American Indian Authors*, *AIS 400 American Indian Education*, *AIS 410 Perspectives of Native California Indians (GE)*, *AIS 420 American Indian Women (GE)*, *AIS 450 American Indian Science*, *AIS 460 Power and Politics in American Indian History (GE)*, *AIS 470 American Indian Ethnicity: Problems in Identity*, *AIS 480 American Indian Social Movements*, *AIS 500 Language and Cultural Systems of North American Indians*, *AIS 530 American Indian Psy-*

*chology, AIS 560 Modern Creative and Performing Arts, AIS 600 Current Issues in the American Indian Community, AIS 685 Projects in the Teaching of American Indian Studies, AIS 694 Community Service Learning Option, AIS 699 Special Study, AIS 701 Seminar in American Indian Studies.*

The general goals of the American Indian Studies program are to provide needed academic services to American Indian communities on a local, regional, national and international basis; continue training and education of the American Indian in the academic scholastic realms and the traditional realms of life; educate the student in scholastic interpretation and training through the cultural lenses of the traditional American Indian tribal perspectives; build a substantive academic base from which the historical, anthropological, and sociological experience of the United States American Indian populations can be viewed.

These goals are met by a multifaceted system of coursework, research and community service. Students can participate in local history projects, school district tutorial work, community service and social service.

The American Indian Studies program expects considerable evolution in its offerings and services as it evolves to promote positive social change in the larger society.

Within the courses offered by the program, a student will experience various histories, ancient art forms and music styles through special lectures, individual instruction and group participation. It is hoped that at least a glimpse of who Indigenous peoples are will be obtained by the student, thereby creating a better understanding of the American Indian.<sup>11</sup>

### ***American Indian Studies Today***

With an American Indian student population that ranges between 150-200 self-identified American Indians, the department primarily serves a non-Indian population. The demographics of the campus as of Fall 2000 are as follows: the student body consists of approximately 38 percent White; 35 percent Asian/Filipino/Pacific Islander; 14 percent Chicano/Mexican American/Other Hispanic; seven percent African American; one percent Native American; and five percent other non-White students.<sup>12</sup>

The non-Indian student population has little to no knowledge of American Indians either historically or contemporarily. Given that the department is still a minor program, there are no prerequisite requirements for our courses. Thus, faculty faces a daunting task of teaching students from across the spectrum. As a living viable people, American Indians have much to offer students interested in learning and gaining an understanding of the First Peoples of the United States. Therefore, it is important to allow both the Bay area Indian community to teach and the students to learn all the while establishing the AIS department as a conduit for this connection.

As clearly articulated in the goals of the American Indian Studies Department, community service is an essential component of the department's mission. As such, it is unusual that the department did not have a formalized community service learning program wherein students could receive university credit for their work, service and internships in the Bay area American Indian community. Therefore in 1998 a grant was applied for that would establish formal community service learning courses within the Department of American Indian Studies. American Indian Studies Community Service Learning was created to provide SFSU faculty with assistance in integrating Community Service Learning (CSL) in the curriculum. Service learning offers students the opportunity to divide their time between academic study and community service as part of their course work. Community Service Learning helps faculty and students by reaching out to community agencies and developing field placement opportunities for students. The American Indian Studies Department has instituted Community Service Learning throughout the department curriculum. The scope and nature of these opportunities are developed taking into account the nature of the course and community agency needs.

A formal CSL program has enabled faculty to offer enhanced learning opportunities to students that connect student interests with community needs. The increased level of organization and the availability of course credit for community service has encouraged greater student participation, enhanced learning opportunities, and encouraged collaboration and partnerships between the university and local community service organizations.

The Department of American Indian Studies at SFSU has been at the forefront of this new approach to learning. Community service is an important aspect of our pedagogical philosophy in the American Indian Studies Department. On an intellectual level, a commitment to the local community is representative of the move in many university disciplines to integrate theory with practice.

Given the urban environment of the Bay area, American Indian students and non-native students have a unique opportunity to service and learn from a community that has a significant political and social history. Finally, given that the American Indian Studies Department draws a diverse student body from across the university, our community service learning components have connected individuals from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and thus encourages cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

The CSL option was initially included in two courses: *AIS 205 American Indians and U.S. Laws* and *AIS 460 Power and Politics in American Indian History*. The agency options students would have to choose from would be easily incorporated into the course and course material. For example, some of the initial agencies who participated in the CSL program were *National Indian Justice Center*, *Law offices of Patrick Guillory*, *California Indian Legal Services*, *International Indian Treaty Council* and *United Indian Nations*.

Currently the CSL program is integrated throughout the department. Each faculty can choose whether to offer CSL as a component, module, requirement, or option. *Community Service Learning—AIS 694*, requires students to earn additional units while participating in community service learning. The response to CSL has been extremely positive. CSL currently has a webpage, database and has added several new agencies. Currently, 18 community services are offered with such agency options as *Inter-tribal Friendship House, American Indian Public Charter School, Oyate, Inc., California Indian Museum and Cultural Center, American Indian Child Resource Center, American Indian Film Festival, American Indian Family Healing Center, and National Native American AIDS Prevention Center* to name a few.

### ***Future of American Indian Studies at SFSU***

In order for the department to succeed, it must offer a commitment to stability and the inclusion of additional faculty to the tenure and tenure-track process. Fall 2000 demographics of the diversity of faculty illustrates much less diversity than the student body. The faculty include approximately 70 percent White, 14 percent Asian, 6 percent Hispanic, 6 percent African American, and 4 percent other non-White. The administration composition is 69 percent White, 15 percent Asian, 7 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent African American. The staff data shows more representation from underrepresented groups. Whites are 49 percent; Asians 30 percent; Hispanics 11 percent; African Americans 8 percent, and other non-Whites 2 percent.<sup>13</sup> In a recent assessment of the department, it was established that there is a need for a tenure-track professor with expertise in the humanities. This person would be responsible for providing consistency and continuity in courses such as *AIS 162 American Indian Oral Literature, AIS 214 Second Year Written Composition: American Indian Studies, AIS 225 American Indian Art, and AIS 360 Modern American Indian Authors*. Currently the department has its strengths with its course offerings in the social sciences. However, in order to offer a well balanced program other areas must be consistently represented. More commitment must be directed towards the retention and recruitment of American Indian Students. This would include staff positions, which are designated to direct such tasks as student recruitment and retention, and serve as the student advisor.

American Indian Studies is committed to the expansion of the American Indian student population and continues to encourage efforts to further that endeavor. For the past few years, I have served as the faculty advisor to the *American Indian Studies Review Journal*, an annual publication of the American Indian Studies Department, College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University. The journal is a cooperative project between students and faculty of American Indian Studies. The *American Indian Studies Review Journal* strives to provide a forum for contemporary North American Indian issues. We must continue to revitalize our programs with opportunities enabling stu-



dents to acquire skills with opportunities enabling students to acquire skills that will assist them in their development and growth.

The department offers a diverse list of courses for students to fulfill the general education requirements. During Spring 2000, the department produced the University's valedictorian who was selected from 6,800 graduates. Kouslaa Kessler-Mata (Yokut/Chumash), AIS minor, was selected as the valedictorian and gave a speech to nearly thousands which honored the AIS department and its faculty for engaging her and changing her life.

In March 2001, former student Richard Oakes' memory and contributions to the University campus was honored by naming the new Multicultural Student Center, a 600-square-foot oval room within the Cesar Chavez Student Center in his honor. His legacy on this campus is not yet well known. This is precisely why it is important for American Indian Studies to continue to promote the ideas, events and people who have contributed to the betterment of all American Indians.

In the last few years, the AIS department has offered an American Indian Student Graduation, which highlights the accomplishments and achievements of American Indian graduates. Emphasis is placed on the important role that American Indian families and communities contribute to the success of the student. Students are welcomed and encouraged to wear their traditional regalia and receive a sash, which designates them as an American Indian graduate. Last year, the Richard Oakes Community Service Award was inaugurated to acknowledge outstanding American Indian individuals whom through their service have benefited the university, student and American Indian community.

American Indian Studies is more than just an academic program. It is a field of study, which by its very nature incorporates the people it serves to investigate. Thus, having a faculty that is in tune with the complexities and needs of the local, regional and national Indian community is fundamental to the success of American Indian studies programs. Therefore, the activism of the 1960's, which led to the formation of the program, is still consistent within the department today, in that in order to be a successful American Indian faculty one must also be an academic activist.

There has been discussion to move the department to offering a baccalaureate in American Indian Studies. However, we must be cognizant of our service population and what the needs of both the students and community are. Given the current situation in Indian country with the success of tribal gaming, perhaps certificate programs and program emphasis may be the future of the department at SFSU. Offering programs with certificates that can be readily applied to careers may be an ideal undertaking for the location and direction of AIS program at SFSU. This may include offering certificate programs in such areas as tribal gaming, tribal leadership, environmental justice, mediation and conflict management, repatriation and restoration, and community development.

The Department of American Indian Studies has made a full circle to its goals and founding principles. With current commitment and success of com-

munity service learning. The success of the program is evident in the students' continued participation and support of these agencies. In addition, Indian organizations have come to work more closely with the faculty, staff, and student populations on campus. A commitment to serving the needs of American Indian students, our community and the non-Indian population is important to future of the American Indian Studies program. We are fortunate to have American Indian faculty with both the academic expertise as well as applied work skills in both tribal and urban Indian environments.<sup>14</sup> This unique combination of expertise offers students a pedagogical style that will encourage a generation of critical thinkers, scholars, policy makers, teachers, and citizens that will treat each other with the dignity and the respect needed for a society to exist.

### Notes

1. Adam Fortunate Eagle, (Nordwall), "Urban Indians and the Occupation of Alcatraz Island," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (1994) 18, no. 4, pp. 33-58.
2. Joan Albon, "Relocated American Indians in the San Francisco Bay Area: Social Interaction and Indian Identity," *Human Organization* (1964) 23, pp. 296-304.
3. David H. Getches and Charles F. Wilkinson, F. *Federal Indian Law Cases and Materials* Second Edition, (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1979) West Publishing Company, pp. 147."All the statutes of the United States which affect Indians because of their status as Indians shall no longer be applicable to the members of the tribe."
4. Joan Weibel-Orlando. *Indian Country, L.A.: Maintaining Ethnic Community in Complex Society* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 18. Weibel-Orlando offers a detailed analysis of the impact of relocatees to the southern California region.
5. Edward D. Castillo, "Native American Activism in the San Francisco Bay Area" unpublished paper, 2000. Edward D. Castillo (Cahuilla/Luiseno) is currently the Chair of Native American Studies and California State University and Sonoma and was teaching at UCLA in the late 1960's.
6. Philippine American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE), 1968, cited by Glenn Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990's," *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*. Karin Aguilar-San Juan, ed., (Boston: South End Press, 1994)
7. Troy Johnson, editor *Contemporary Native American Political Issues* (Landman, MD: Altimira Press, 1999), p. 289. Altimira Press, 1999, pp. 289. Troy Johnson, Duane Champagne and Joane Nagel. "American Indian Activism and Transformation: Lessons From Alcatraz.
8. Wilma Mankiller and Michael Wallis. *A Chief of Her People* (New York: St. Martins Griffin Press, 1993), p. 156.
9. Arrell Morgan Gibson. *The American Indian Prehistory to the Present*. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1980), p. 569.
10. Castillo. pp. 5.
11. See <http://www.sfsu.edu/~ethnicst/AIS.html> or the current SFSU bulletin.
12. San Francisco State University Self Study for Reaccreditation, WASC Report, Chapter 10, Enhancing Human Relations, Spring 2001.
13. Ibid.
14. Adjunct faculty Joseph Myers (Pomo) is the founder and director of the National Indian Justice Center. Nicole Myers-Lim (Pomo) and David Lim are staff attorneys with NIJC and Project Managers with the California Indian Museum. I currently work with California tribes on a education legislation, legal initiatives and national politics to secure tribal sovereignty and serve on a number of community boards and committees.