

American Indian Studies

Tribes affected: Pantribal

Significance: *American Indian studies programs, which began in the late 1960's, seek to preserve and understand American Indian history and culture.*

Since the late 1960's, American Indian studies (or Native American studies) programs have served as the most important scholarly approach to knowing and understanding American Indian culture. Traditional teachings of tribal and village elders remain the solid foundation of American Indian and Native American studies. These culture bearers provide the understanding essential to legitimate study of the native peoples of the Americas.

Establishment of Programs. Dependence upon European American (notably Anglo-American) source materials has made for distortion in scholarly studies. As professor Henrietta Whiteman has stated, "Cheyenne history, and by extension Indian history, in all probability will never be incorporated into American history, because it is holistic, human, personal, and sacred. Though it is equally as valid as Anglo-American history it is destined to remain complementary to white secular American history." This specific difficulty led in large part to the creation of American Indian studies programs in existing institutions of higher learning. Despite limited funds, Native American programs began to emerge as interdisciplinary curricula. Most American Indian studies programs focus on long-term goals involved with cultural preservation, unlike Western, objective academic disciplines such as history and ethnology. American Indian studies use teaching, research, and service to cross cultural boundaries and create an atmosphere for understanding. In many instances, the American Indian studies degree programs are the only non-Western courses of study on campus.

American Indian or Native American studies programs vary considerably in method and subject matter. These also represent

different degrees of institutional support, budget size, and quality of program leadership. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, various programs began to emerge at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, Los Angeles. Other programs developed in the California State University system on campuses at Long Beach, Fullerton, and Northridge. At that time, California had the largest Native American population in the United States. Oklahoma had the second-largest native population. Two degree programs were created in Oklahoma in the early 1970's, one at Northeastern State University at Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation, and one at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha. The Native American studies degree program at the University of Oklahoma was accepted by the higher regents in 1993. Other American Indian studies degree programs were created at the University of Minnesota, the University of Washington, Evergreen College, Washington State University, the University of Arizona, the University of Illinois (Chicago), Dartmouth College, the University of North Dakota, Montana State University, the University of New Mexico, and Cornell University, among others. By the mid-1980's, eighteen programs offered a major leading to a bachelor's degree. Of these, six programs also offered a master's degree.

Tribally Controlled Colleges. Tribally controlled colleges added new energy to American Indian studies. In 1968, the Navajo Nation created the first tribally controlled institution of higher learning. Navajo Community College was a success and led to the passage of the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978. This act provides for some federal support for tribally controlled colleges initiated by tribes in the western United States. Initially, this helped support thirteen tribally controlled colleges. Since the act's passage, at least nine additional colleges have been initiated. Colleges that followed the creation of Navajo Community College include Sinte Glista College, Standing Rock College, Blackfeet Community College, Dull Knife Memorial College, Salish Kootenai College, Little Bighorn College, and Stone Child

College, among others. Lummi College of Aquaculture in Washington has expanded to become the Northwest Indian College. Sinte Glista College on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation has grown to become the first fully accredited tribally controlled four-year institution of higher learning.

In all these examples, the tribally based community colleges have not only aided the education of individual Indian young people but also improved the development of the tribal communities that they serve. Of primary importance is that Indian people are now controlling institutions that directly affect them. The tribally controlled colleges are far outstripping the state-supported and private colleges and universities in retention of American Indian students. The tribally controlled colleges have become important centers of research. These colleges are proving to be better suited to the needs of American Indian students and communities than their state-supported and private counterparts. The tribally controlled colleges offer hope to tribes that have, all too often, survived in a climate of despair.

Issues and Concerns. In the early 1990's, American Indian studies emerged in a period of questioning current methods and practices concerning spirit, philosophy, structures, roles, contexts, and intent. The quest for meaning appeared in many guises. The interest in the emotional component of community life, the expansion of traditional approaches to knowledge and wisdom, the acceptance of grammar and logic stemming from native languages, and the hope of differentiating Western-based interpretation from traditional knowledge all reflected the aim of uncovering purpose, meaning, and perspectives on truth in presentation. There was pervasive anxiety that the individual is being submerged in community. There was additional attention being given to the way people feel as well as the way they behave. There was also a movement in American Indian studies toward narrative storytelling in the literature. American Indian studies places human beings and the comprehensible societies in which they live into the story. These are real stories, however, not dry and forbidding pieces of analysis.

The quest for meaning only multiplies the pluralism of current research and teaching. The very process of recovering deeper motivations and attitudes, dragging the latent out of the manifest, requires such personal feats of imagination and use of language that questions about plausibility and proof are bound to arise. Senior faculty at one state-supported university in Oklahoma challenged the continuation of a bachelor's degree in American Indian studies, stating, "While the program is inessential to a liberal arts education, it is not inconsistent with one." This type of Euro-American bias makes it difficult to pursue knowledge and wisdom in an atmosphere with freedom of thought and feeling.

The obverse of the quest for meaning is an uneasiness with the material conditions of life that until recently seemed so compelling. A clear, single idea emerges from the doubts that have been expressed about the power of economic development. As American Indian studies turns to more emotional content, the demand is for a more elusive process of comprehension. Analytical and technical research is increasingly limited, as mental patterns, attitudes, and symbolic acts become more prominent.

Questions of the use of quantification arise because of the almost exclusive use of United States and Western social science data. What is at stake is a profound epistemological question, not just a disagreement over collection of data. American Indian studies many times are very personal and intuitive. The insights are justified within a specific tribal context with powerful rhetorical and imaginative methods. They appeal to an interest in behavior that is very different from Anglo-American intellectual concerns, but never claim to be definitive.

The establishment of an agenda for American Indian studies, of a set of methods or purposes indigenous to the Americas, or of a special task for its practitioners, hardly seems plausible. American Indian studies is united in its respect of tribal traditions. There is observation of certain fundamental rules for using evidence so as to be intelligible across cultural boundaries. None of these skills is difficult to learn; neither is the telling of a sustained story, which is a special mark of scholars and teachers in American Indian stud-

ies. The one form of synthesis used most often by those in American Indian studies blends the disparate methods of current research in examinations of tribally specific localities. This synthesis convincingly links physical conditions, economic and demographic developments, social arrangements, intellectual and cultural assumptions, and political behavior, with mythic patterns and images.

Archives and Tribal Records. The most important repository of American Indian knowledge remains with the tribal elders. There is no substitute for this significant information. This knowledge and wisdom can be gained only with real commitment over a significant period of time. Tribal elders have become wary of “instant experts,” whether Indian or non-Indian. All scholarship must access this wisdom and knowledge to reflect tribal tradition and history.

Once removed from this vital core of information are the tribal archives and records. These are held in a variety of ways. For example, the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes maintain their tribal archives as a part of the Wichita Memory Exhibit Museum at the tribal complex on reserve land north of Anadarko, Oklahoma. A second example is that of the Navajo Nation, which collects and preserves its records as a part of the Navajo Tribal Council Reference Library in Window Rock. A third example is that of the Cherokee Nation, which maintains a portion of its records in the Archives of the Cherokee National Historical Society in Tahlequah, while the records of the Cherokee Nation from 1839 through 1906 are held in the Indian Archives of the Oklahoma Historical Society, which functions as a trustee for the United States government. These records were placed in trust in 1906, just before Oklahoma statehood, before the National Archives of the United States was created. Each tribe maintains its records in an individual way. Contact with the tribes is the best means to understand their respective record-keeping systems.

U.S. National Archives. Large numbers of records about American Indian peoples are held by the National Archives of the United States. These are housed in the Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Maryland, and in eleven regional Federal Archives and Records Centers throughout the United States. Additional records holdings concerning American Indian peoples are contained at the presidential libraries administered by the National Archives and Records Service. The papers of the presidents and many of those of other high officials, including the files of individual members of Congress, are regarded as their personal property. These personal papers are collected in large part by state-supported university manuscripts collections.

The basic organizational unit in the National Archives collections is the record group. This refers to the records of a single agency, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and its predecessors. The National Archives endeavors to keep records in the order in which they were maintained by the respective agency. The agency filing system was designed for administrative purposes, not for the benefit of researchers. There are important guides to assist in research efforts, however. The two most important of these are *Guide to the National Archives of the United States* (1974) and *Guide to Records in the National Archives of the United States Relating to American Indians* (1981). Another useful volume is *Indian-White Relations: A Persistent Paradox* (1976), which includes papers and proceedings of the National Archives Conference on Research in the history of Indian-white relations.

Additional materials concerning Indian-white relations are contained in the United States Supreme Court decisions, the research that was used in the Indian Land Claims Act of 1946, and in the manuscript collections of major universities throughout the western United States.

American Indian studies has long been limited in perspective because of the heavy dependence upon documents generated by Euro-American policymakers, businesspersons, and military personnel. Scholarly works accepted many of the assumptions of those who produced these sources. American Indian people were

perceived either negatively as an enemy or romantically as part of the environment. In the last decade, scholarship in American Indian studies has changed significantly from this approach. More balanced efforts are being made by American Indian scholars utilizing native languages and tribal sources. All American culture and society is being shown in a new light as a result of the creative images and ideas of American Indian studies.

Howard Meredith

Sources for Further Study

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. *Tribal Colleges: Shaping the Future of Native America*. Princeton, N.J.: Author, 1989. Reviews the colleges that have been established for Native Americans.

Grounds, Richard A., George E. Tinker, and David E. Wilkins, eds. *Native Voices: American Indian Identity and Resistance*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003. A scholarly examination of law, politics, and religion as related to Native American studies programs.

Heth, Charlotte, and Susan Guyette. *Issues for the Future of American Indian Studies*. Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 1985. Examines the field of American Indian studies.

Hill, Edward E., comp. *Guide to the Records in the National Archives of the United States Relating to American Indians*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, G.S.A., 1981. Helps researchers find information contained in the archives.

See also: Education: Post-contact; Ethnophilosophy and World-view; Language Families; Oral Literatures; Tribal Colleges.