

# **Sacred Places: Indigenous Perspectives of Education and Place**

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## **Educating American Indians**

Since the 1960s, tribal colleges in the United States have provided post-secondary options for students in rural communities, mostly in the Northern Plains. The tribal college movement began with thirteen institutions in geographic regions where there were limited post-secondary options. In 1994 twenty-nine tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) became land grant institutions under the Elementary and Secondary Education Reauthorization Act. By 2008, thirty-two tribal colleges and universities had land grant status. Most of these are two-year- degree-granting colleges. However, six are four-year institutions, and two offer a master's degree. Currently there are thirty-eight tribal colleges ([www.aihec.org](http://www.aihec.org)). To maintain their eligibility for federal funding from the Tribal College Act, TCUs must maintain a minimum enrollment of 51% of their students from federally recognized tribes. The 2012 fiscal year appropriation of \$66,583,158 ensured a per capita distribution of \$5,665.<sup>1</sup> Funds are appropriated within Department of Interior's budget and distributed by the Bureau of Indian Education's Higher Education Office in Oklahoma City. The funds directly supporting the Tribal College Act are basic to operations. Tribal colleges also charge tuition and fees for enrollment, but students may be eligible for Pell funding and tribal scholarships.<sup>2</sup>

In 2009, the Department of Education established a Title III program that would supplement activities within state colleges and universities serving American Indians. Previously, the Department of Education created categories for Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic Serving Institutions. The designation as Native American Serving Non-Tribal Institutions (NASNTI) requires a minimum enrollment of 10% self-identified tribal members to be eligible for supplemental funds. Currently there are thirty-six NASNTIs identified by the Department and twenty-one of those are two-year institutions (Fann 2012).

## **Identifying Indians**

The question of ethnicity and heritage is wrapped in legal interpretation (United States v. Bruce; Simmons v. Eagle Seelatsee), anthropological and biological pointers

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<sup>1</sup> Email Correspondence from BIE, Oklahoma City Office, December 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The exception to this is Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institution and Haskell Indian Nations University; these two post-secondary institutions are funded 100% from BIE appropriations.

(Beaulieu, 1984; Chakraborty & Weiss, 2005), media representation and stereotypes (NCAI, 1999; NIEA, 2009), the changing definitions of the Census Bureau (U.S. Census, 2010), and personal preference. This mixture of definitions provides a wealth of information and very few absolutely definitive answers. Even the use of the descriptor “Native American,” “American Indian,” or “Indian” is debated.<sup>3</sup>

There are over 550 federally recognized tribes in the United States. Additionally, there are state recognized tribes who have petitioned for federal recognition. Each tribe has the sovereign authority to determine membership. Some tribes are patrilineal and enroll members only if their father is an enrolled member; others are matrilineal and enroll membership through the mother’s ancestry. Tribes can also determine a minimum blood quantum. For example, The Comanche Tribe of Oklahoma requires a blood quantum of 1/8 for consideration of enrollment, while the Western Band of the Cherokee Nation requires only proof of descendants from the original Dawes Rolls. Actual blood quantum for these individuals is listed on tribal rolls but is not required to meet any minimum threshold for services from the tribe or from the federal government.

In most post-secondary institutions, proof of ancestry is not required. The exception to this is the requirement of tribal colleges and universities where proof of membership in a federally recognized tribe is required for the TCUs to be eligible for federal funding. Students are required to provide tribal enrollment membership data if they claim tribal ancestry. This is a significant distinction from public and private colleges. In public and private post-secondary institutions, individuals self-identify on their applications for admission, financial aid, and scholarship opportunities. Mainstream and private colleges and universities are not worried that an individual will make a mistake or that they will provide false information when providing this data. The data is collected and used to generate a portrait of the campus which reflects the needs of the students in any given semester. Most American Indian students in higher education are in public colleges and universities. Tribal colleges estimate that they serve 7% of the total population of American Indians pursuing a post-secondary degree ([www.aihec.org](http://www.aihec.org)).

## Sacred Places

There are over 500 distinct indigenous<sup>4</sup> communities in North America alone. Each indigenous community belongs to a specific language group and recognizes and practices cultural traditions in combinations that distinguish communities from each other, especially to insiders. Some indigenous communities share a language heritage or land base, yet remain distinct in other characteristics Barnhardt and Kawagley explain this process as recognizing generalization as indicative, but not definitive (2005: 10). The task in this process requires a balance of perspectives. Native ways of knowing, in contrast to Western education practices, is acquired and represented through the context

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<sup>3</sup> We use the term American Indian based on the preference of The American Indian/Alaska Native Professors’ Association, unless the specific tribal membership is known.

<sup>4</sup> Indigenous is defined as originating and living or occurring naturally in an area; in this article it is politicized. Indigenous people are those people who live on their own land historically, but who have little or no political power on that land.

of place, revolving around the needs of a community and the best efforts to actualize a holistic understanding of the community's environment. Native ways of knowing uses an indigenous research lens to study and interact in the world. Western educational practices dissect and disconnect knowledge, while native ways of knowing presumes a holistic context. The primary difference between the two lies in the emphasis of native ways of knowing on "knowing," as a verb and Western educational practices that emphasize the accumulation of "knowledge," a noun (Warner, 2006).

The designation of NASNTI's by the Department of Education moved native ways of knowing from the boundaries of tribal colleges into state supported institutions. Northeastern Oklahoma A & M College (NEO), a two-year public college in Oklahoma, integrated native ways of knowing into the curriculum as part of two federally funded grant projects: Title III Part A and Title III Part F. NEO developed a model to embed native ways of knowing into existing and newly developed courses. At NEO, native ways of knowing is defined as place-based or constructivist delivery to achieve course objectives and indicators of success. As a NASNTI, educators emphasized constructivist learning processes that encourage authentic exchanges, instructive demonstrations and the opportunity to focus on real-life applications. A model was created to guide curriculum development that links native ways of knowing and the "place" where students live and learn embedded in the rich history of NEO College, the local American Indian tribes, and the communities in which students live.

NEO College maintains ties to the nine tribes who maintain tribal headquarters in Ottawa County. There are more federally recognized tribes in this county than in any other county in the nation. The college is built on land originally allotted to the Ottawa tribe. Currently 26% of the enrollment at NEO College is American Indian, one of the largest in this county for a state-supported institution.

NEO College was founded as the Miami School of Mines in 1919 to meet the needs of a large mining community in northeast Oklahoma, southeast Kansas, and southwest Missouri. Through the years, the mission of the College changed to meet the needs of a broad spectrum of students. Today, the College serves as a comprehensive, residential college, providing a range of student activities and intercollegiate sports. NEO used the mascot Norseman to merge NEO's place with native ways of knowing.

The NORSE model emerged as the working framework to embed native ways of knowing and place-based education in NEO curriculum. In this model, NORSE is defined as:

Native Opportunities: Placed-based expectations  
Retention: Forward movement  
Success: Degree Completion  
Education: Lifelong learning.

Native opportunities or place-based expectations anchor the curriculum in northeast Oklahoma and emphasize the link to multi-tribal histories and heritage. Additionally, it

affirms the “place” the student is in personally and respects the norms of each of the places the student is engaged in while pursuing a post-secondary degree. This definition of “place” also includes expectations for gender and age.

Retention, the second component of the NORSE model, is defined as forward movement. Retention at NEO is the timely matriculation of students to completion of a degree or certificate. Success at NEO is defined as degree completion in alignment with the national initiative Complete College America. Strategies for retention and success go hand-in-hand. For students to reach their ultimate goals of degree or certificate completion, students matriculate through their academic programs in a timely manner. The emphasis on place in the curriculum and classroom supports both retention and completion.

Education is defined as lifelong learning in this model. This places an emphasis on the creation of learners who have the opportunity to freely shape their individual life choices by responsible action. The common good is supported when lifelong learners move into their community as contributing members to that community. The quintessential goal of the state is met when an individual pursues a “common good.”

Teaching strategies for native ways of knowing are embedded in the framework. Instructors have begun to develop and link the artifacts of the curriculum to the NORSE framework. The process for moving mainstream curriculum to reflect native ways of knowing included professional development and curricular redesign. The correlation between native ways of knowing and constructivists teaching is high and instructors are able to align assignments and assessments through reflection. For example, the course syllabus for the new online courses reflects the indicators of NORSE. Specific learning objects have been developed and are online for use for all instructors which reflect NORSE as a framework ([neo.edu/nativewaysofknowing](http://neo.edu/nativewaysofknowing)).

The individual course objectives reflect native ways of knowing and include place-based education. The faculty teaching these courses developed course assessment strategies to determine the overall performance of students in relation to the objectives. Further assessment is being conducted at the College level. Faculty and staff are given an opportunity to provide feedback about native ways of knowing, place-based education, and the use of the NORSE model in achieving the goals and promoting student retention and success. Native ways of knowing provides an opportunity for the administration and faculty to dialogue about the needs of NEO as a NASNTI to ensure that all students benefit from the programs and opportunities available.

## Applying NORSE at NEO

One example of how native ways of knowing and placed-based education have been linked together to promote student learning in the classroom, lifelong learning, and a sense of contribution to the common good is the integration of the NORSE framework in a general education science class. Portions of Ottawa County were heavily mined for lead and zinc during the first half of the twentieth century. The chat removed from the

mines has a heavy lead content and the water run-off from the mines carries minerals which are dangerous to the environment, creating a significant health hazard. Efforts to mitigate the distribution of minerals and their effects are ongoing. The local American Indian tribes are at the forefront of this effort because this impacts their “place.”

An NEO faculty member who teaches a science course embedded with the NORSE framework incorporated learning activities that used local water, plants, and soil as a live science laboratory. She also incorporated the native approaches to reducing the risk associated with the contamination into the curriculum. These place-based learning activities promoted students understand of where they lived and the ways they can contribute to improving the environment for the common good of this “place.”<sup>5</sup>

While this example illustrates a clearly distinguishable learning experience in native ways of knowing and place-based education, the principles can be applied in all fields of study. One only has to look to the rich history, culture, heritage and needs of the community in which one lives to identify strategies for integrating native ways of knowing and placed-based education for the common good of its people. The road to embedding native ways of knowing into an institution’s curriculum begins with understanding the institution, its purpose, and its values. At NEO College, these elements provided the foundation for developing the NORSE framework which faculty and students could relate to as they transitioned to a constructivist perspective for curriculum development and classroom learning through native ways of knowing and place-based education.

### **Services to Support Learning**

NEO recognizes the importance of support outside the classroom. Through Title III: NASNTI Part A grant funding, NEO created the American Indian Center for Excellence (AICE). Kah-Ne-You-Ah Hall, a former residence hall steeped in rich NEO tradition, was renovated to provide an array of services which include:

- *A gathering place* to relax and make new friends.
- *Resources* for jobs, internships, scholarships, and student leadership opportunities.
- *Academic guidance* on class selection and registration, and review degree progression plans.
- *Professional guidance* on tribal scholarships, financial aid, personal concerns, college advising, and balancing work, school, family and culture.
- *Events* including American Indian clubs activities and cultural events.
- *Referrals* on child care, health services, housing, social service agencies, and custom campus tours.

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<sup>5</sup> This excerpt was originally part of an article for *The Journal of Thought* authored by Linda Sue Warner and Bethene Fahnestock.

- *Computer terminals* for writing papers, e-mail, researching, and searching the Internet and free printing ([neo.edu/studentlife/Americanindiancenter](http://neo.edu/studentlife/Americanindiancenter)).

These services are open for all NEO students and reinforce academic and counseling support throughout the institution, linking each of these services to the College's Mission and Goals. The framework provided by native ways of knowing allows cross-cultural support for all students. The AICE also supports native ways of knowing through professional development with regional educators, art shows, cultural feasts and pow-wows, and opportunities for language preservation. Faculty in the region draws on the knowledge of the AICE staff and the resources available to enhance student learning.

### **One Campus, Many Nations**

Regional two year institutions were established to provide cost-effective opportunities for higher education throughout the nation. The growth of the junior and community college movement and the integral purpose they continue to serve reflects each State's commitment to education for the common good. These institutions reflect a regional economic perspective and they contribute to the intellectual growth of the community. For NASNTIs, this contribution to the local community fosters partnerships with tribes. Tribal economic development strategies reflect a commitment to local tribal members and the merging of these resources with higher education institutions is important in a climate of declining resources. The various tribal commitments to NEO range from student scholarship support to partnerships in federal grant proposals. NEO also supports the tribes with specific language course delivery on campus. The incorporation of native ways of knowing in the new online curriculum provides an opportunity for a significant partnership with local tribes, as the institution acknowledges tribal philosophy for teaching and learning in a mainstream venue. NEO serves as a national model for the use of native ways of knowing for NASNTIs as they continue to serve multi-tribal students in higher education. The framework and examples developed for use at NEO are a direct reflection of the native ways of knowing as a philosophy for teaching and learning. Each of the faculty who participated in the professional development was provided with a copy of the following quote. This quote serves as the primary foundation for all course development, training, and assessment. While the origins of the quote are a modification of the Six Nation's Great Law, the philosophy reflects that of the profession of teaching, regardless of the level, and serves to remind faculty that the common good is served when an individual succeeds.

As teachers we are mentors of our students for all time.  
We labor to stand against anger, sadness, criticism and defeat.  
Our hearts shall be full of peace and our minds filled with an  
urgency for the welfare of our students.  
With endless patience, we embrace our duty.  
Our firmness shall be tempered with tenderness.  
Our words and actions are marked by calm deliberation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nawea to TAiaike Alfreda for his direction to The Kaienerekowa from the Haudenosaunee.

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