

## **A Brief History of the American Indian Education, Research and Culture Center on UW's Campus**

Native American students are the most underrepresented population in higher education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). In fact, when compared to other minority groups, Native Americans have the lowest representation and retention rates (Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013). Such low retention rates are due to several reasons, many of which are intertwined with the tragic history of colonization and Native American boarding schools (Waterman, 2011). The underrepresentation of Native American students in higher education is a complex issue involving several factors, such as lack of financial support and campus resources, cultural beliefs, social stigmas, and stereotypes. According to Evans et al. (2010), we need to “recognize the role of colonization” (pp. 266-267) and its effect on the Native American view of the educational system. Many individuals may not trust institutions of higher education due to the history of boarding schools, in which Native Americans were forced to adhere to White culture (Waterman, 2011). If millennial Native American students have grown up hearing their parents or grandparents speak negatively about the educational systems in the United States, they may have acquired distrust as well. Moreover, it is difficult for them to leave a closely-knit community. Connection to family and community – and a sense of responsibility to both – are values on which Native American culture places great importance (LaFromboise, Heyle, & Ozer, 1990, as cited in Shotton, Yellowfish, & Citrón, 2010). The Native American student must learn to navigate through an independent culture where importance is placed on the self, rather than the group as a whole. According to Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, and Nitzarim (2013), the amount of social support Native American students receive from their families and communities is positively correlated with persistence to degree completion. They must learn to live in an independent culture, but they also must learn to incorporate their interdependent roots into their academic experiences within mainstream culture.

In 2002, soon after being appointed to the UW Board of Trustees, James Trosper conducted several listening sessions with Native American student organizations and current and past students from the Wind River Indian Reservation. The listening sessions were conducted to elicit solutions to the unique challenges Native American students face at UW. Several themes emerged from those meetings. In the Native American culture, emphasis is placed on giving back to their communities when they graduate. Giving back is encouraged not only inside the family but also within the community. A college education means more than just obtaining a career and financial independence for these students, it is an instrument to provide a service to their families and community. Native American students develop a purpose or a vision for their future differently from students belonging to mainstream culture. Native American students tend to choose careers that will reflect cultural values, such as humility and charity, which often conflicts with the mainstream values of prestige, independence, and competition. It is a reflection of an Indigenous philosophy of putting community before individualism.

To address the unique challenges Native American students face at the University of Wyoming a group of administrators, faculty, staff, and students began conversations about an American Indian Center. An American Indian Center steering committee was organized at UW. The founding members included John Dorst (UW American Studies Program); Affie Ellis, Navajo (Wyoming Attorney General's office); John Nutter (UW Student Financial Aid Director); Emma Hansen, Pawnee (Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Plains Indian Museum); Marcia Britton (Wyoming Humanities Council); Jeff Means, Lakota (UW Faculty, Department of History); Judy Antell, Chippewa (UW Director, American Indian Studies); James Trosper Northern Arapaho/Eastern Shoshone (UW Board of Trustees).

In August of 2005, Judy Antell and Trustee Trosper made presentations to UW President Tom Buchanan and Vice President Myron Allen regarding the American Indian Center. Approval was given to move

forward with a documentary explaining the need for such a center. A separate presentation was made to UW Board of Trustees President Judy Richards and Vice President Haynes. In an article from a 2007 A&S newsletter of the College of Arts and Sciences, the concept of a center was described. When the 2009 University Plan 3 was created and approved, it included Action Item #74, which listed an American Indian Center as a Tier III project for future development.

As a major first step, the advisory committee decided to create a documentary CD describing their thoughts on the multiple benefits of such a center on the Laramie campus. That CD was created by UW TV producer Ali Grossman with grant funding from the Wyoming Cultural Trust and support from various units on the campus in fall 2008. The video was entitled *Envisioning an American Indian Center on the University of Wyoming Campus*.

James Trosper, Judith Antell, and John Nutter appeared before the Wyoming Legislature's Select Committee on Tribal Relations on December 14, 2011 in Fort Washakie at the Frank B. Wise Business Plaza. Present from the Select Committee were co-chairmen Senator Cale Case and Representative Del McOmie, Senator Paul Barnard, Representative Pat Goggles, and Representative Jeb Steward.

In 2011, the University published its updated Capital Facilities Plan. In addition to a list of specific projects already being planned, it listed the American Indian Center as a project under further consideration.

As a next step, the committee, now joined by other interested administrators and referring to itself as the American Indian Center Steering Committee, sought and received a \$10,000 grant from the Wyoming Cultural Trust. The purpose of the grant was to host two stakeholder meetings to ascertain what programming services and facilities should be included in the center. The product of these meetings would be the profile for creating an American Indian Center.

After issuing a request for proposals in 2010, the committee selected Johnpaul Jones, a Native American architect from Seattle and lead architect of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of the American Indian, to conduct the meetings and prepare the profile.

In February 2011, one stakeholder meeting was held on the UW campus involving American Indian students, faculty, and administrators; the second meeting was held in April on the Wind River Indian Reservation with tribal leaders, educators, and students. An impressive project profile was developed by fall 2011 outlining the purposes to be served, space requirements, facilities required, programming desired, services to be provided, and sample suggestions from other American Indian centers. The profile was designed to guide the preparation of planning and construction documents through a period of changing personnel, economic climate, and events. The American Indian Center was ready for a priority designation by the UW central administration to begin detailed planning efforts through the university's capital facilities construction process. Since this time, the project has remained in a pending status.

There are many opportunities for the University of Wyoming and the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone people to work together in ways that empower tribes, nurture innovation for American Indian sustainability, and demonstrate respect for Native people's cultures, traditions, laws, and diverse expressions of sovereignty. Education offers the greatest opportunity for improvement from one generation to another. For many Native American students, education – especially higher education – has been the route to an improved quality of life. A major focus is on educating graduates who are grounded in their own culture, yet are prepared with the social, civic, and work skills they need to live and contribute to a multicultural, global society.