Focusing Our Vision:
American Indian Urban
Higher Education Initiative

Working Symposium Report

May 7-8, 1997
St. Paul, Minnesota
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Operating support for the American Indian Research and Policy Institute is provided by the General Mills Foundation, Minneapolis Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation, St. Paul Companies, and the St. Paul Foundation.

**American Indian Research and Policy Institute**
749 Simpson St  
St. Paul, MN 55104
(612) 644-1728 Fax (612) 644-0740
E Mail: airpi@skyport.com
Website: http://www.airpi.org
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Executive Summary

John Poupart
AIRPI President

The American Indian Urban Higher Education Initiative: Building a Community Vision for Our Future

The American Indian Urban Higher Education Initiative (AIUHEI) is a new project in the Twin Cities sponsored and supported by a number of tribal colleges, metro area post-secondary institutions, and American Indian community organizations. The institutions participating in the project include the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College, the Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, the Native American Educational Services (NAES) College, Augsburg College, Metropolitan State University, and the University of Minnesota. The community-wide level of participation and enthusiasm expressed for this collaboration is unprecedented; never before in the Twin Cities have so many higher education professionals come together to address the problems and needs of the higher education system that serves urban American Indians.

The purpose of the Initiative is to provide a broad base of community involvement to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to address the problems and needs of the higher education system serving American Indians in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. This process will bring about fundamental changes in the existing system in order to help more urban Indian students successfully attain post-secondary educational goals, compete better in the job market and enjoy an improved quality of life. The process will involve a two-year research and planning phase, followed by a five-year implementation phase. This symposium represents the beginning of the research phase.

The AIUHEI steering committee, which consists of approximately 60 higher education professionals and community members, proposed a symposium and a series of community forums to gather opinions and focus the vision of the American Indian community regarding post-secondary educational goals. This report presents the symposium findings regarding the barriers and potential avenues to success for the Initiative.

The American Indian Research and Policy Institute (AIRPI) coordinated the symposium, which took place May 7-8, 1997, at the University of Minnesota’s Earle Brown Center. AIRPI had previously sponsored similar forums in the spring and fall of every year since 1992, and the steering committee considered them the ideal choice to coordinate this event. The topics of AIRPI’s previous forums, ranging from American Indian children’s issues to tribal sovereignty issues, all involved the impact of public policy on American Indian communities.

AIRPI worked with the AIUHEI steering committee to design a symposium that was acknowledged in the participant evaluations as a “great start on a great project.” In order to ensure that the seven-year project would be solidly
grounded in the values of the American Indian community, the planners made the symposium a highly participatory gathering; they asked each of the teachers, students, professors, administrators, and community activists in attendance to contribute their opinions and knowledge. This was accomplished through the “nominal group process,” a method which allows maximum participation and at the same time helps form consensus opinions about the issues at hand. Elizabeth Blue, of the University of Wisconsin-Superior School of Social Work, led the first such session, in which the large group of 80 participants forged a statement of values regarding post-secondary education that would guide the more specific discussions later in the afternoon.

The afternoon workshops also used the nominal group process to achieve consensus opinions regarding their more specific questions. These small groups of 6-15 participants—teamed with two facilitators for each group—set priorities about the manner in which the Initiative should proceed in the future. The workshop topics were as follows: Linking Tribal and Mainstream Education, Special Challenges of Today’s Urban American Indian Student, Contributions of American Indian Faculty to Post-Secondary Education, and Academic Excellence and Institutional Development.

Several leaders in the field of American Indian education spoke to the participants as well. They provided valuable and inspiring information about what has been accomplished in other areas, and offered their own perspectives on challenges lying ahead. In a keynote address hailed by many as the highlight of the symposium, Albert White Hat, of Sinte Gleska University in South Dakota, told how his community on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation had eventually come to embrace an educational system based entirely in Lakota philosophy. He further discussed the challenges and discoveries the journey had presented. Jack Briggs, President of Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, offered an informative overview of the tribal colleges in the United States and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). Dr. Jasjit Minhas, President of the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College, discussed the many challenges he faced in trying to link his college’s programs with programs at neighboring schools and post-secondary institutions.

Significant challenges face the urban Indian community as the AIUHEI begins this project, not the least of which are the soaring poverty rate and the decline in prominence of traditional tribal values affecting people’s lives. Symposium findings seem to indicate that we can address these ills and many others by working together to form an educational system that serves the urban Indian people in new ways. It is our hope that by grounding the Initiative in the values of the community, we can accomplish goals that will be of enduring benefit to the urban American Indian community. ■

**Vision Statement**

The American Indian Urban Higher Education Initiative believes in the respect for and use of American Indian cultural traditions and philosophies in higher education. We value inclusion of family and community as teachers and supporters. We will build upon mutual understanding and respect between cultures and institutions. We will incorporate mutual accountability and reciprocity with tribal communities, and we will commit to a sustained, long-term effort to provide self-directed, self-defined post-secondary education to urban American Indian people.
Albert White Hat Urges Education Based in Tribal Philosophies

"One way to teach the younger generations the Indian traditions, and effectively teach Indian people," said Albert White Hat at the symposium's keynote address, "is to intertwine Indian culture and traditions in the formal education process." A Lakota from the Rosebud reservation, White Hat is a culture and language instructor at Sinte Gleska University, the only tribal college to date to gain university status. The university's curriculum and programs are based in Lakota philosophy and culture, an innovative approach to fighting the problems of culture loss and lack of educational achievement at the same time.

Sinte Gleska University's history begins in 1949, when one of White Hat's older brothers began a petition urging the tribal council to adopt the state code of education of South Dakota. White Hat says that his older brother and the other petitioners had an idea that eventually their petition would clear the way for a college on the reservation, but their present purpose was to integrate all the schools within the reservation boundaries. Their petition was accepted and passed by the tribal council. After a brief confrontation with local whites, the Lakota people prevailed. The formerly white schools were integrated, and groundwork was laid for a reservation college at Rosebud.

In 1968, White Hat's older brother started another petition, this time urging the tribal council to create a tribal college. Again, the petition was successful, and soon the tribe hired a consultant to conduct a needs assessment. The consultant found that there was a need for a college on the reservation for both the Lakota and the local non-Indians, a fact White Hat attested to with stories of his own early failures due to inadequate education.

To develop a college, the tribe sought planning assistance from the state universities, but was summarily dismissed by all of them. Eventually, the tribe was able to enlist the aid of the University of Colorado. When the South Dakota universities heard about that assistance, some of them began to help plan courses and programs for Sinte Gleska, too. Together they designed courses in math and English first, since after years of sub-standard reservation and boarding school education, students wanted and needed the basics most.

But the future of Sinte Gleska lay not just in its ability to provide students with math and English skills. Perhaps the most exciting part of Sinte Gleska's story began with the decision of White Hat and the Sinte Gleska board members to find Lakota medicine men and ask them for guidance on the project. In the late 1960s and early 1970s when they were conceptualizing and developing the school, the medicine men were "underground," and hard to find. They found them, though, and the medicine men gave them advice that they have heeded to this day. They said "make the institution based on the foundation of Lakota philosophy. You must hire the best in the academic world-- the best you can get-- and learn everything they know.... Use that to strengthen and fortify the Lakota philosophy."

The founders of Sinte Gleska worked hard to achieve that monumental task. Through the years, they have hired an astounding number of professors who left mainstream university jobs.
with much higher salaries, because they considered Sinte Gleska a frontier institution. Their assistance has been an invaluable asset to the school and the community.

Perhaps the more challenging aspect of the medicine men’s advice, according to White Hat, was to create a curriculum based in Lakota philosophy, especially since less than one third of one percent of the Lakota population truly understood Lakota philosophy. A major barrier to their efforts was the extent to which the philosophies of the two main churches on the reservation—Catholic and Episcopal—had become entangled in people’s understanding of Lakota philosophy. White Hat found this problem most visible in the Lakota language—in the definitions people assigned to words. Catholics assigned one meaning to a word, Episcopalians another, and the young alcoholic, drug-using cliques assigned still another meaning, while none of them matched the original Lakota meanings explained by the medicine men and other traditional people. True Lakota philosophy was replaced quietly as people’s understanding of the language changed.

“Be careful of the translation of the Indian language,” warned White Hat. “It may be translated to reinforce Western philosophy.”

As an example of this problem, White Hat discussed the common translation of “wakan” to mean “sacred” or “mysterious.” When he asked the medicine men and traditional people what “wakan” meant, they replied, “You are wakan... because you have the potential to give and take life. Because you have the potential to build or to destroy. You have both good and evil in you. They are equally powerful. Every creation has that—grass, trees, animals...” The common translation did not capture this, and the meaning of an important part of Lakota philosophy was distorted by an inaccurate translation. In that way, even subtle changes in definition can quickly alter the philosophy of a tribe.

Every student graduating from Sinte Gleska must fulfill core requirements in Lakota Studies, regardless of their major. In the early years, students were angry about the Lakota Studies requirement—they thought it was useless. They did not believe they could learn valuable information from their own people. Now, says White Hat, they want to take Lakota courses. They want to learn Lakota philosophy so they can “honestly present themselves as Lakota people.”

When they have reached that stage where they have an associate’s degree and a strong foundation in Lakota philosophy, says White Hat, “western” education becomes a challenge that can be accomplished. Learning how to think from a Lakota perspective gives them the confidence and wisdom they need to successfully pursue careers or continue their education elsewhere. Even students who do not pursue degrees, though, take classes at Sinte Gleska simply to pursue a better life.

In his closing remarks, White Hat reminded the audience that it was urban American Indians—especially Twin Cities Indians—who pushed the reservations towards embracing tribal traditions and cultures in the 1960s and ’70s. The urban Indians came back to the reservations saying, “I am an Indian, and I want my traditions,” said
White Hat. “For a time, the reservation was a place that Indians returned to die.” Now, thanks to the leadership of the urban Indians, the reservations are a homeland and people have reclaimed tribal cultures as valid and positive forces in their lives.

As the medicine men advised, Sinte Gleska University provides students with high-quality education that is based in Lakota values and traditions. Students are not only better equipped to get hired for jobs, they are better equipped to serve their community and teach their children the Lakota ways. Sinte Gleska’s service to the community as a cultural, educational, and economic resource makes it a leader in American Indian post-secondary education, and provides the AIUHEI with valuable insights into how to achieve its goals.

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The Nominal Group Process

The AIUHEI symposium used a method known as the “nominal group process” to help participants express their opinions and create consensus statements. Since consensus-building is a traditional form of decision-making among many tribes, the nominal group process was a particularly appropriate method for an American Indian symposium such as this one. The process involved asking participants to think about a particular issue or question for a few minutes, write down their thoughts, and then discuss how best to address it. After discussing their ideas within a small group, the participants decided which of their ideas they agreed upon. Each small group then shared its ideas with the other groups who followed the same procedure. The entire group discussed the ideas presented by the small groups, and again decided which ideas they all agreed upon. Using this process, the forum participants worked together to create several consensus statements about the issues at hand, and ranked them in order of importance.

Many participants produced valuable commentary that never found its way into the condensed priority statements that resulted from the nominal group process. To retain more of that wealth of commentary, AIUHEI consultants Elizabeth Blue and Priscilla Day combed through the participants’ original written statements for more information. Blue and Day were able to identify important themes in the written statements that many participants held in common but chose not to prioritize. This extra step helped preserve and reveal the opinions of the quieter participants without diminishing the integrity of the consensus statements produced through the nominal group process. The priority statements and unprioritized common themes can be found in the workshop reports in the Priorities section.

The AIUHEI used the nominal group process to create a consensual vision statement that would accurately reflect the values and needs of the urban American Indian community.
Priorities Established in Workshops

Participants spent the afternoon of the first day in small group workshops wrestling with specific issues or challenges facing urban American Indian higher education today. The workshops followed the “nominal group process,” which begins with each participant identifying and writing down the challenges and barriers they perceive. These were shared with others in the small group, and the group then selected and ranked the issues which seemed highest in priority.

Linking Tribal and Mainstream Higher Education

This workshop was facilitated by Tony Genia (University of Minnesota Institute on Race and Poverty) and Michael Peacock (Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College). This group declared a need for a “holistic approach to Indian education that is owned by Native American communities” as the most important challenge in this area of higher education, although they had difficulty deciding which of many urgent issues should be given highest priority. Indian higher education, they asserted, cannot be compartmentalized; it must link all aspects of knowledge together to do justice to traditional tribal philosophies. American Indian communities and higher education faculty need to control the programs at all the institutions to guarantee that courses remain faithful to the philosophies and needs of the people.

Their second issue was the problem of communication between institutions. There need to be “more effective systems of communication on education issues within and among the Indian community and Indian colleges and mainstream universities.” At present, they believe that time and resources are wasted because faculty at different institutions are unfamiliar with the programs at other institutions. This can lead to unnecessary duplication of services, or complete lack of services that could have been provided by—or shared with—other institutions.

The group’s third issue was the need for “development of Indian student activities within mainstream universities that lead to academic success.” While tribal colleges offer an environment that tends to encourage American Indian students, mainstream colleges can be alienating for some American Indians. Students transferring to mainstream colleges from Indian colleges often feel this more strongly. There needs to be a structure in place that can make mainstream universities less alienating.

The fourth issue the group cited was the need to “negotiate articulation agreements that recognize the validity of Indian education.” Mainstream institutions need to recognize Indian colleges as equals, which includes accepting Indian college transfer credits. In addition, all the institutions need to honor the values and philosophies of the Indian communities.

The fifth issue this group raised was collaboration between the community and the institutions. There needs to be “community-institution collaboration in advocating for all levels of students to address and target resources for financial aid and support services involving childcare, tutoring, mentoring, and access to information about career development and placement.” In other words, the community, the schools, and the tribes need to work together to
ensure that the needs of the students are being met.

Other important issues raised about linking mainstream and tribal colleges, but not prioritized, include the following:

- Institutions must value the cultural heritage that American Indian students bring to higher education and use it to assist in career exploration, counseling, and academic advisement.
- There are differences in how “academic excellence” is defined, and institutions must struggle with that.
- Tenure decisions in universities and tribal colleges need to be open to community input.

**Special Challenges to Today’s Urban American Indian Student**

Facilitated by Sam Ardito (NAES College) and Roxanne Gould (University of Minnesota American Indian Learning and Resource Center), this group pondered the specific difficulties of being an urban American Indian student. They indicated that urban students’ “lack of identity, positive self-image, and role models, and loss of culture” are the most important challenges the AIUHEI needs to address. The urban post-secondary institutions should work together to reverse these problems which are exacerbated by being away from extended families, tribal homelands, and traditional tribal ceremonies.

The group further identified the “lack of culturally appropriate educational environment and support services” as the second major issue in need of redress. In other words, more culturally appropriate curriculum and student support services are a prerequisite to a meaningful educational program for Indian students.

Other important issues raised in the discussion of urban American Indian students’ needs, but not prioritized by the group, include the following:

- Urban schools offer poor academic preparation and poor guidance/career counseling.
- American Indian students experience negative peer pressure and lack of family support for higher education.
- American Indians are unfamiliar with higher education settings.
- Some American Indian students fear they will lose their culture or become “less Indian” by attending mainstream higher education institutions.

**Contributions of American Indian Faculty to Post-Secondary Education**

This group was facilitated by Flo Wiger (Metropolitan State University) and Cindy Peterson (Augsburg College). The group identified several key contributions of American Indian faculty, but decided not to rank them, as they believed they were all of equal importance. They also identified barriers that at times keep American Indian faculty from fulfilling these contributions.

“American Indian faculty,” they stated, “are visible community members who serve as role models, mentors, institutional advocates for urban American Indian students, and who recruit American Indian students and faculty” and provide a kind of academic kinship structure. They offer leadership and examples of cultural pride to the students. They also give back to the community and serve as community leaders. Unfortunately, they say, many American Indian faculty are “not bureaucracy-oriented, and therefore not legitimized by institutions” through promotion and tenure. Their service to the community goes unnoticed in the current system, which can eventually lead them to overextend themselves and burn out quickly.
“American Indian faculty try to be sensitive to the different needs of individual American Indian urban students, thus providing a comfort level for students, and they can relate to identity issues of students.” Once again, burnout can be a factor that keeps American Indian faculty from fulfilling this role. Institutions often expect American Indian faculty to fill this role without any extra pay or any relief from other duties, which means they often have to work twice as much as most of their white peers.

The group asserted that “American Indian faculty put learning experiences into meaningful, ‘real life’ cultural contexts.” They incorporate contemporary and practical issues into their lessons, and they understand how to make courses more meaningful to American Indian students. There is, however, a lack of institutional support for that type of teaching. The faculty who do teach that way are often discredited because of rigid disciplinary biases and models, as well as the rigid western construction of what constitutes “knowledge.”

Other important issues the group raised in the discussion of the contributions of American Indian faculty to post-secondary education, but did not prioritize, include the following:

- Institutions and American Indian faculty must recognize the diversity of learning and teaching styles.
- American Indian faculty need to have visibility in the community and early educational programs to assist with mentoring and serve as role models.
- American Indian faculty should conduct and share research which applicable to “real life.”
- American Indian faculty can serve as advisors to parents about their children’s college education.

Academic Excellence and Institutional Development

This workshop was facilitated by Don Bibeau (University of Minnesota) and Barbara Dudley (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College- Minneapolis). The group identified seven issues to be addressed, foremost of which were issues related to personnel. They advocated for the use of elders and culturally eminent teachers as well as regular American Indian faculty as role models and mentors for students. They argued for the “recruitment of faculty with varied teaching styles” who are able to accommodate varied learning styles, and also those who are “culturally grounded in Native traditions, and who will validate tradition and cultural knowledge.”

A second set of issues was related to student nurturing. The group said that institutions must establish “appropriate support services for working with student self-esteem, goal-setting, motivation, identity issues, cultural grounding, and building pride in who they are as individuals and tribal members.” The programs should aim to develop the “whole” student.

They ranked issues of practical concern third, noting in particular challenges faced in financial aid, transportation, counseling, family and child care, scheduling of classes to accommodate family obligations, and the provision of an open-door policy to assist in dealing with problems without appointments. Many concerns were
Workshop Findings: Quick Reference

Linking Tribal and Mainstream Higher Education

Needs:
1. Holistic approach to Indian education that is owned by Native American communities.
2. More effective systems of communication on education issues within and among the Indian community and Indian colleges and mainstream universities.
3. Development of Indian student activities within mainstream universities that lead to academic success.
4. Negotiate articulation agreements that recognize the validity of Indian education, including but not limited to:
   - Honoring of Indian college credits.
   - Honoring Indian values and the philosophies of the Indian community.
5. Community-institution collaboration in advocating for all levels of students to address and target resources for financial aid and support services involving childcare, tutoring, mentoring, and access to information about career development and placement.

Special Challenges to Today's Urban American Indian Student

1. Lack of identity, self-image, and role models, and loss of culture.
2. Lack of culturally appropriate educational environment and support services.

Contributions of Native Faculty to Post-Secondary Education
(group chose not to rank issues)

American Indian faculty...
- ...are visible community members who serve as role models, mentors, and institutional advocates for American Indian students. They recruit American Indian students and faculty. They offer leadership, and examples of cultural pride to students. They give back to the community and serve as leaders there. Barriers: American Indian faculty are not bureaucracy oriented, and therefore are not legitimized by institutions, and are at risk for burnout.
- ...are sensitive to the different needs of individual American Indian urban students. Barrier: Burnout
- ...put learning experiences into meaningful, “real life” cultural contexts. Barriers: Lack of institutional support; American Indian faculty are often discounted by rigid disciplinary biases, models, and “knowledge.”

Each workshop had 2 facilitators and 6-15 participants.

Academic Excellence and Institutional Development

1. Personnel: hiring of Native faculty, role models, and mentors; faculty with varied teaching styles, who are culturally grounded in Native traditions, and who will validate tradition and cultural knowledge.
2. Student nurturing: establishing programs and appropriate support services for working with student self-esteem, goal-setting, motivation, identity issues, cultural grounding and building pride in who they are as individuals and tribal members.
3. Practical issues: easy access to financial aid, transportation, counseling, family and child care, with scheduling of classes to accommodate family and parental obligations, and cultural sensitivity on the campus.
4. Autonomy: educate institutions and non-Indians about the need for culturally-specific programs for American Indians (since Indians are so unique among communities of color in the US); demand respect for American Indians and their cultures, histories, and sovereignty.
5. Community and family support: involve community and families in planning and implementing student careers and institutional programs from grade school through graduate school; recognize reality of importance of family; see education institutions as a part of the community.
6. Building understanding of American Indian belief systems: regarding academics, learning styles, time, respecting difference, and focusing on cooperation rather than difference.
7. Careers: provision of marketable skills in the changing job market, career preparation, and to aid in meeting the needs of the community.
The purpose of the American Indian Urban Higher Education Initiative is to provide a broad base of community involvement to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to address the problems and needs of the higher education system serving American Indians in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. The project will create fundamental changes in the existing system in order to help more urban Indian students successfully attain post-secondary educational goals, compete better in the job market, and enjoy an improved quality of life. The process will involve a two-year research and planning phase, followed by a five-year implementation phase. This symposium represents the beginning of the research phase. Watch for more publications from this project in the future. For more information on the AIUHEI, please contact Margaret Peake Raymond at (612) 813-1610.

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American Indian Urban Higher Education Initiative
Project Coordinator: Margaret Peake Raymond

Higher Education Coordinating Team
Sam Ardito, NAES College
Donald Bibeau, MSW
Tamara Buffalo, MN Indian Women’s Resource Center
Steve Chapman, Minneapolis Public Schools
Loretta Gagnon, St. Paul Public Schools
Tony Genia, U of MN Institute on Race and Poverty
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Joan Myric-Lewis, Women of Nations
Michael Peacock, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College
Cindy Peterson, Augsburg College

The American Indian Urban Higher Education Initiative wishes to thank the following for their hard work and dedication in helping with the symposium: the participants, the Earle Brown Center, Gordon Thayer, John Poupard, Mariene White Rabbit Helgemo, David Born, Bobby Whitefeather, Elizabeth Blue, Priscilla Day, Albert White Hat, Jasjit Minhas, Sam Ardito, Nancy Barcelo, Jack Briggs, Cindy Peterson, Flo Wiger, Tony Genia, Michael Peacock, Roxanne Gould, Donald Bibeau, Barb Dudley, Dawn Blanchard, Sue Kincade, Angie Losh, Tracy Becker, John Rosales, Jessica Kramer, Wayne Bruns, Andriana Arbietos, Stefani Levi, Sophia Jacobson, and Heidi Helgemo. Special thanks to Brian Klopotek for preparation of this forum report. We would also like to thank Daryl No Heart for the AIUHEI logo and artwork.