

Preparing Educators to Meet the Challenge of **Indian Education for All**

American students' knowledge of Indian history and culture is woefully inadequate. Montana now requires its teachers to remedy this situation, but it has become clear that, to do so, they themselves must first be re-educated.

BY LYNN KELTING-GIBSON

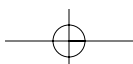
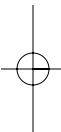
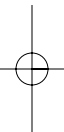
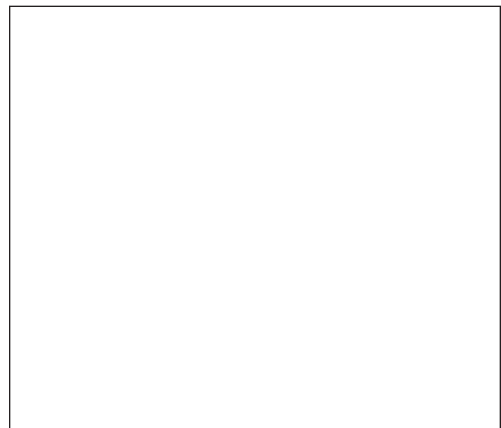
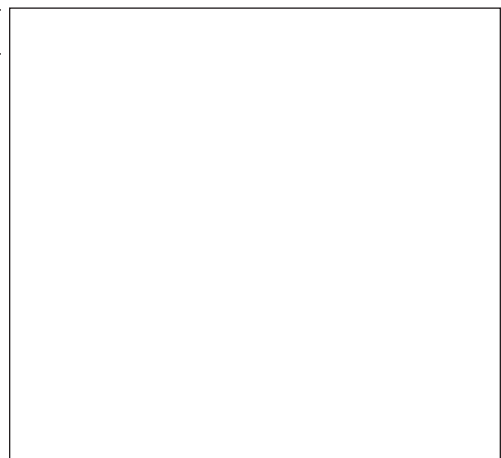
Teachers think they're doing a lot for us by having a week on Indians — "We're going to do an Indian unit" — especially before Thanksgiving — "and we're going to make a little headband with feathers and everyone is going to understand what it is to be Indian." That's ridiculous.

— Nola Lodge (Oneida)

WE HAVE ALL seen and probably suffered through the kind of educational experiences Nola Lodge describes. From instructional materials to classroom decorations, schools are deluged with stereotypical images of America's Native peoples. Despite a vast array of research and primary sources that provide a complex and highly textured history, a simplistic version of how non-Indians settled the North American continent persists in most classrooms around the nation. Montana's Indian Education for All (IEFA) Act offers a remarkable opportunity to change that. The law requires that *all* of Montana's children learn the history and culture of the 12 tribes and seven reservations spread across the state.

Research indicates that American Indian students still attend schools where they do not see themselves reflected in the school's guiding principles, in the curriculum, or even in their own classrooms. Meanwhile, non-American Indian students still do not learn about their Indian peers, with whom they will continue to work and live throughout their lives. Up to now, little has been done to implement specific language in Montana's constitution requiring a commitment to preserve American Indian history and heritage through education.

This year, for the first time, the state legislature has funded implementation of IEFA. As we begin to implement the law, most of our focus is on classroom teachers and administrators. That is as it should be. The first



steps will occur in classrooms around the state, and most teachers, administrators, and other school personnel are not ready. As they begin, they will need a strong program of professional development that emphasizes both gaining knowledge about the tribes and developing the strategies necessary to infuse that knowledge into classroom instruction. However, we must also begin to think in the long term about how we can educate preservice teachers and administrators for the future so that they can enter schools ready to make IEFA a vibrant, meaningful, and integrated part of life in their learning communities.

TOWARD A COURSE OF STUDY

In fall 2003, the director of the Northern Plains Transition to Teaching, an alternative certification program, asked me to develop an online course that would help teachers meet the requirements of IEFA. I had experience developing online courses but had never designed a course about American Indians. As I looked around for examples of such courses, I found nothing that would serve the purpose of preparing students for the specific tasks called for by IEFA. I would be starting from scratch. As a non-Indian, I was acutely aware of my own lack of expertise in American Indian history and culture. Could I trust that a course I developed would be historically accurate and culturally appropriate? What if I made the same mistakes that had been made so often in the past and, without knowing it, perpetuated stereotypes or taught inaccurate information? Because of the complexity of American Indian history and culture and the diverse perspectives and experiences of Indian people, it is always difficult to make decisions about course content. This is true for both Indian and non-Indian course developers. As Richard Littlebear of the Northern Cheyenne noted, "Whenever we as American Indian people develop . . . curriculum materials, we tend to immediately develop a faction that opposes their use; this opposition occurs without anybody appreciating the fact that members of our own tribes locally produced these materials."¹

With some hesitation, I decided to take on the challenge. Confident that I could develop instructional activities and fully aware that I could *not* make decisions about the content, I knew that consulting local and state Indian education experts every step of the way would be crucial.² I felt fortunate to have the assistance of Dulce Whitford (Blackfeet), with whom I had previously worked placing preservice teachers on the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations. As we planned, we expanded our circle to in-

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clude many recognized leaders in Indian education from around the state.

We wanted our course to be challenging and useful for both novice and veteran teachers. We strove to develop clearly relevant assignments and to find readings that would be both informative and accessible to those new to the study of Indian history and culture. Most of all, we wanted the course to be practical. Again, with the guidance of others and through our own expertise, we found readings and textbooks and developed assignments that would be valuable for all teachers.

The first text we chose, *Collected Wisdom*,³ presents thoughts and ideas from Indian and non-Indian teachers around the country. It addresses current topics regarding Indian education and how teachers are meeting the needs of their American Indian students. The second text, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Native American History*, is designed "to provide you with lots of stories — stories that tell the history of a diverse group of people."⁴ And the third is *The Seventh Generation: Native Students Speak Out About Finding the Good Path*.⁵ We chose this book because we felt that the teachers who would be taking the course needed to hear the voices of Native American students sharing their stories about how life is and how it should be. The blend of the three texts was a perfect balance of information to help educators initiate or enhance their implementation of IEFA.

From these texts, we selected eight topics designed to give teachers a background in Native American history, the history of Indian education, and contemporary issues. Three topics focus on history: Tensions Created by Euro-Americans; History of and Legislative Issues Regarding Indian Education; and Reservations, a New Way of Survival. Readings on these subjects would provide historical material that students were encouraged to integrate into their curriculum.

We also included contemporary topics: Oppression, Native Languages, and the Portrayal of American Indians in Current Curriculum/Texts. These topics encouraged teachers to find out more about current issues faced by Indian peoples.

Two other important topics, Indian Learning and Teaching Styles and School and Community Relations, have to do with the needs of American Indian learners. These topics seemed essential to helping teachers understand how their Native American students learn and how to honor the important contributions of families and elders.

We developed assignments related to these topics, including researching and writing about an American Indian tribe, attending an event, developing lesson plans and cur-

ricula, writing an article, reflecting on reading assignments, and evaluating reading materials. We knew that, as in most online courses, discussions and postings of thoughts and questions would also be key course components.

After we developed the first draft, we sent the syllabus to Indian education specialists around the state, encouraging feedback. Many responded with suggestions and comments that led to central components of the course. We believe that such highly collaborative efforts are necessary to bring IEFA into the state's classrooms.

THE FIRST COURSE

A total of 20 veteran and novice teachers enrolled in the eight-week course conducted during the summer of 2005. The assignments, readings, course discussions, and postings created interesting dialogue among the students. As we assessed the course, three points emerged that will guide us in future course development.

Personal growth. One of the most beneficial aspects of this course was the personal growth students experienced. Though the readings and other assignments expanded their knowledge, one component of their research project — attending an event that related to the tribe they were studying — seemed to have had the most powerful impact. For most, this was their first such cross-cultural experience. As one student noted in her journal, “The best thing I did for my view and understanding of the American Indian was to attend the Lewis and Clark Expedition celebration at the Gallatin County Fairgrounds. . . . I listened to lectures on the American Indians by American Indians, and was also able to conduct interviews. . . . It was an incredible education and solidified the lessons that we had this semester.”

Lesson integration and curriculum development. Most students recognized how narrowly they were actually integrating Indian culture and history into their curricula. Teachers readily admitted that they had come to the course feeling a need for more information. At the close of the course, students reported that they had gathered enough information to help them get started and that they had concrete plans to alter their instruction based on what they had learned and experienced. They also reported that what they had learned would be passed along to their colleagues.

Compassion. The course had the unexpected result of helping the students develop a sense of compassion. Teachers reported that they had come to recognize their ignorance about Indian culture and that the lack of knowledge had prevented them from understanding their Native American students. Among the most often reported changes in



their understandings were: the challenge their Indian students faced by being “split between two identities,” the impact of language differences, and the reality of cultural differences between themselves and their students. The course also seems to have been effective in helping to close the gap between teachers and their Native American students. After discussing the differences she had come to recognize, one teacher commented that she had also learned that, in many ways, her American Indian students were not any different from her.

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

We were pleased with the success of this course. However, it is just a beginning. The lessons learned will be used to determine future directions to pursue. The course will continue to grow and develop as more and more examples of successful implementation of IEFA emerge and as more and more of Montana's citizens are educated about the history and culture of American Indians living in Montana. We have also begun to study ways to strengthen the course by following the work of course participants as they return to their classrooms or begin their teaching careers. Over time, we can alter the course to respond to teachers' changing needs.

We are walking here on fresh snow; there are no footprints to follow. That makes the next several years both exciting and challenging for those of us in teacher preparation programs. Courses like American Indian Studies for Educators are just one of the building blocks necessary to energize Indian education in any school district, classroom, or teacher education program, not only in Montana but across the nation.

Realizing that teachers are largely unprepared for successful implementation of IEFA, many in the Indian and school communities have begun to ask what preservice programs will do to better prepare teachers in the future. In this case, university programs have much in common with schooling at all levels. There is a limited amount of time to teach an ever-expanding array of content. The challenge for these programs will be to find ways to infuse their existing coursework with new experiences and, at the same time, continue to meet the requirements already in place.

One of the central lessons I learned from developing

this course is the importance of broad collaboration. It is not that others do not trust us to develop these courses; it is that we do not — or should not — trust ourselves. To meet high standards for accuracy and inclusion, it is essential for our teacher preparation programs to collaborate with American Indian people, including but not limited to members of the Native American Studies departments in our universities. In addition, education programs across the state can collaborate with one another to share their successes and learn from their failures.

Much remains to be done. But I'm confident that we can work together to create a course of study that will prepare both new and experienced teachers to meet the intent of IEFA. I look forward to the day when teachers asked to teach about American Indian history and culture will begin without the hesitancy and anxiety I experienced when I began developing my first IEFA course. I also look forward

to the day when "making little headbands with feathers" disappears from Thanksgiving observances. *That* will be a day worth celebrating.

1. Richard Littlebear, "Some Rare and Radical Ideas for Keeping Indigenous Languages Alive," in John Reyner, ed., *Revitalizing Indigenous Languages* (Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University Press, 1999), p. 2.
2. I would like to express my appreciation to all who helped make this course such a positive learning experience for both my students and me. In particular, I would like to thank Henrietta Mann, special assistant to the president of Montana State University and Indian education specialist; Mike Jetty, Indian education specialist at the Montana Department of Public Instruction; Dulce Whitford, Indian education specialist; and Lori Falcon, school administrator at Heart Butte, Montana.
3. Linda M. Cleary and Thomas D. Peacock, *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1997).
4. Walter C. Fleming, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Native American History* (New York: Alpha Books, 2003).
5. Amy Bergstrom, Linda M. Cleary, and Thomas D. Peacock, *The Seventh Generation: Native Students Speak Out About Finding the Good Path* (Charleston, W. Va.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 2003).



Indian Education for All: THROUGH OUR OWN EYES

The Promise of IEFA

BY WENDY HOPKINS

I AM A member of the Little Shell Chippewa tribe of Montana. Our tribe is not federally recognized and does not have a reservation. We gained state recognition in 2001. Although I grew up on the Fort Belknap Reservation, I never really belonged because, as people there saw it, I wasn't "really" Indian. But I also didn't belong in the white world. When I was able to enroll in my tribe, it changed everything for me. I began to see myself as an Indian person, and that gave me a place to belong and a people I belonged to.

I think Indian Education for All (IEFA) will have a similar effect on many Indian children. It will help our children understand who they are, take pride in their identity, and see that they have possibilities and opportunities. When I was in school, we didn't talk about being Indian. If we could, we kept it secret. That was a way to get along. But with IEFA, our children won't have to do that. They will see themselves in school. They will know that their classmates are learning important things about

them. They can begin to believe that, when they meet non-Indian people, those people will have knowledge about their history and culture. That will make our children stronger, more confident. They will know who they are, where they come from, and what they want to be — and that they are perfectly capable of becoming professionals and meeting a full range of life goals.

Indian people have had to live in a white world; some have learned how to adapt. But when Indian kids meet non-Indian people, they know non-Indian people have ideas about what it means to be Indian and that a lot of those ideas are not very good. With IEFA, Indian kids will have more confidence that the people they meet know about them, that they are good people, and that they can be like everyone else. They will set aside the belief that being from the reservation means they are somehow less.

As a teacher, I always remind myself that kids do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. If Indian students feel that their teachers care about them and believe in them, they will do well. I think IEFA will help teachers understand our kids and know them better. That fills IEFA with promise for Indian children — and for all of us.



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