

# American Indian Studies

## Reinvesting in a 20-year Legacy

by John Soennichsen

Some are incredibly proud of their heritage. Others prefer it not be a big part of their lives. Some wear native costumes and attend Pow Wows and salmon feeds. Others prefer to quietly assimilate into the general student body.

There are just about 200 Native-American students attending Eastern Washington University. They come from suburbs, cities, farms and reservations. They study a wide variety of academic subjects and have a mix of career plans. But despite their diversity in viewpoints, they all have one thing in common - access to a 20-year old program at Eastern that offers academic courses, advising, counseling and cultural support.

"We offer a place where students can come to be with other Native Americans; to relate to the Native American community," says Deirdre Almeida, program director. "The counseling we offer includes academic advising as well as personal and situational counseling."

Advisers from the American Indian Studies Program are there to assist students with career counseling, tutorial services, financial aid information, orientation and assistance with admissions. The program also partners with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and national tribal organizations which offer forums for involvement at a staff and student level. Staff members and students attended the annual conference of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society this fall, and students came back with a goal of establishing an AISES student chapter at EWU. Other organizations that work with the program include the National Indian Education Conference and the National Congress of American Indians.

Recently, the National Congress of Native Americans met in Spokane, offering a wonderful opportunity for Eastern students to explore issues of national importance to Indians, such as declining salmon runs, land ownership issues, Indian-owned businesses and a host of other significant topics.

Academic courses offered by the American Indian Studies Program include: Introduction to Indian Studies, Salish Indian Languages, Introduction to Federal Indian Policy and Survey of Native American Literatures.

A surprise to some people, the majority of students taking American Indian Studies

courses are not Native Americans. Many are Eastern students taking courses because of personal interest or to fulfill cultural diversity requirements at the university. Almeida herself is a big proponent of non-Native Americans taking courses within her program. What does she hope these students will gain?

"I would hope that any stereotypes or negative impressions from movies, television and some erroneous history books, would be dispelled," she says. "I would hope they would have a better understanding of the history and culture of Native Americans. And I would even be hopeful that they might choose to be allies and supporters of the Native American community in the region where they live. Even if a non-Native American student never becomes involved with or an active advocate for the Native American community, I would at least hope that he or she could watch a movie and see stereotypes and say, 'that's not accurate' or if sitting at the dinner table and someone makes some disparaging remark, they might say, 'that's not right.'"

*"We tell students in our classes that we will never hold them responsible for what happened in the past. They weren't there - why should we? But how they act and what they believe in the future should be their responsibility."*

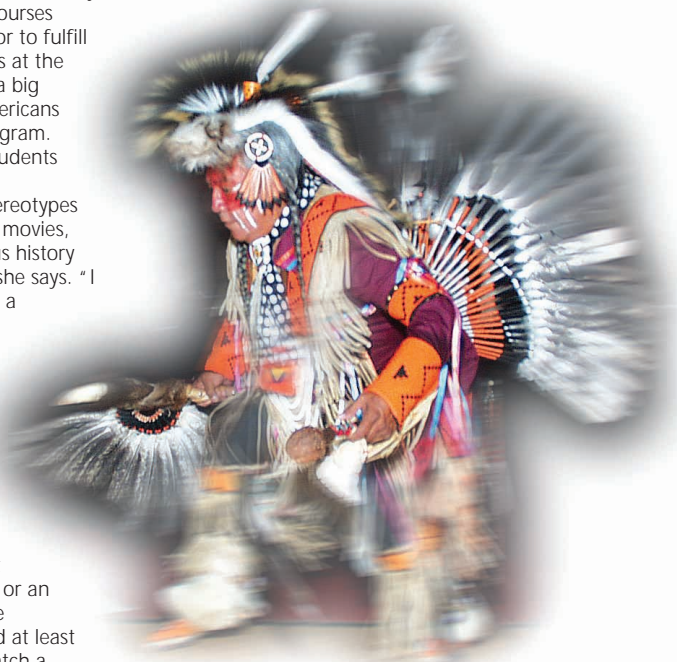
Instruction offered in Indian Studies courses at Eastern reflects Almeida's soft-spoken viewpoints on Native American history and the interaction of Native and non-Native Americans.

"We tell students in our classes that we will never hold them responsible for what happened in the past. They weren't there - why should we? But how they act and what they believe in the future *should be* their responsibility."

Many people view the American Indian Education program as similar to other university programs for "minority groups." But Almeida sees some differences.

"Sure, there are similarities, but of course we are all very different groups of peoples. And I like that Eastern recognizes these differences and maintains separate

programs, rather than many universities I know of back east, where all such programs are under one umbrella with a common staff, as if to suggest that the concerns of Blacks are the same as those of Chicanos or Native Americans or women. I think all these groups believe that people of all ethnic backgrounds and cultures



need to recognize the similarities and respect the differences. And I do think there are some inherent differences with Native Americans simply because they are indigenous peoples.

"One tribal elder put it to me this way once," she says, "It's the difference between fighting for a home and fighting for a homeland."

One way that the Indian Education Program at Eastern has for many years connected with the university and community as a whole is through its cultural events. People who come to the Pow Wow on campus each spring are treated with the beat of native drumming, the color and pageantry of tribal dances and costumes, and the aroma and savory flavors of traditional Indian foods. The Pow Wow at Eastern is a popular, well-attended affair. But as with traditional Hispanic fiestas and African drumming performances, there will always be critics who say that such events have the negative potential to evolve into cultural clichés. Almeida doesn't think so.

"Cultural events like these are part of a whole," she says. "People who take courses or attend educational lectures or presentations will gain the understanding and knowledge that Pow Wows alone can't give you. They will receive a more complete education in



Native American culture. But there's no reason the programming we do should not incorporate cultural activities of that sort, because they're clearly effective in attracting people to the fact that we are here, that we have a program offering information and education about Native American cultures. Social and cultural activities should be balanced with scholarly presentations, art and music performances, and educational activities."

Almeida also hopes her program can help with presentations in local schools involving EWU students and faculty. She believes the outlook is good for such activities because, although she has been in the Inland Northwest less than a year, she sees positive signs that the community is receptive to the program and to other Native American initiatives.

Even with community support, however, she acknowledges the volume of work that needs to be done.

"This program needs rebuilding and healing," says Almeida. "It was left on its own for years with virtually no budget to run a program here. So, that has been a primary concern of mine, to build the program back into a strong one with more staffing and support. We need to engage in more recruiting activities and to let people know we are still here. We are anxious to start an alumni association for the program. And we want to see more ongoing programming for students. We'd also like to return courses to the campus which were once offered and are still in demand. And, we want to beef up counseling and advising."

A major step in the revitalization of the American Indian Education Program at Eastern will have been taken once a remodeling project is finished at the program's traditional headquarters, known by students as The Longhouse. The building, a former church, is undergoing roof replacement as well as the removal of asbestos and radon. The interior layout also is changing; staff offices will be located on the first floor and student offices, meeting rooms and social areas below.

Despite the fact that not all Native American students at Eastern become involved in the program, Almeida says it is her sense

that most students of Indian heritage do not come to Eastern solely for themselves.

"Of course, they're here to study and to leave with career plans – but they also want to contribute to their culture, whether it's by teaching students on their reservation, or becoming a business executive on Indian projects, or a planner in the Native American community. It seems clear to me that most Native American graduates are interested in applying what they have learned to help their people."

One person who knows the potential of the program is Roger Jack, an instructor and counselor with the program, who was a student at Eastern in the 1970s when the Indian Studies Program was just taking off. He recalls accompanying then-director Henry Sijohn on recruiting trips to small towns, high schools and reservations around the state.

"Henry would use us as examples of Indians who had made it to college and he would promote our programs in language, art, history - to convince these kids that they could come here and get an education and learn about their culture at the same time.

"In a lot of cases," adds Jack, "we had to get past the mindset of some of these students; their notion that they were not 'college material' and that they could never realize their dream of being a teacher, for example."

He also recalls the high level of activity at The Longhouse and the staff of eight or ten which the program had at that time.

"I remember it as a very busy period, with people coming and going all the time," says Jack. "Of course, back when I was student, the government was a little freer with its money – there was more funding for outreach, and for visits to reservations and high schools."

"I was a single mom when I was getting my master's in psychology at Eastern," says Robbie Paul, a Native American coordinator for recruitment at the Intercollegiate College of Nursing in Spokane. "Having a place to go to be with other Native Americans was really important to me. I was also impressed that my professors would come to the center to talk to Native Americans and to learn from them as well.

Deirdre Almeida has few doubts that the current

Through the generosity of two alumni, Dr. Robert Hungate ('24) and his late wife Alice, and the late Ed Johnson ('50), now EWU can offer more opportunities to American Indian students.

The Joseph and Winona Hungate Memorial Endowed Scholarship provides scholarships for students from Wellpinit, Mary Walker and Springdale high schools.

Ed Johnson passed away last year and his trustee selected EWU's American Indian Education Program and Alcohol and Drug Studies Program as the recipients of a \$600,000 gift from the estate. In accordance with the wishes of Mr. Johnson and his trustee, \$250,000 will be matched by the state of Washington for an endowed professorship in American Indian Studies and Alcohol and Drug Studies, the first such position in the state. The remainder of the gift will provide scholarships and funding for the development of this combined program, including practicum sites on Northwest reservations.

program can rise to its former level of activity and impact at Eastern, but she acknowledges that it will take time.

"People need to be patient as we work to get this program back where it used to be," she says. "In a lot of respects, it's like starting a brand new program from scratch. And we can use all the help that people are willing to give us."

What can Eastern alums do?

"They can contact us with questions and comments," says Almeida. "They can come out and support our activities, be a mentor to a student, and designate this program when they contribute to the university."

"Not every Native American student wants assistance, and that's fine, too," says Jack. "Others prefer to assimilate into the general society and don't especially care to be involved with Indian cultural events. But for those who do, we are a lifeline for them. We're an important part of their experience at Eastern."



*April 8 - 13, 2002, is the official American Indian Awareness Week on Eastern's campus. Experience Native American music, art, history and speakers. The Pow Wow will be April 13, 2002, in the Pavilion. Contact the American Indian Studies Program at (509) 359-2441 and [www.ewu.edu](http://www.ewu.edu)*