

# **Native American Studies at West Virginia University: Continuing the Interactions of Native and Appalachian People**

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In the heart of Appalachia, Native American Studies has been growing for almost two decades. West Virginia is the only state totally encompassed by the Appalachian region, the mountains of which stretch from Maine to Georgia. About the size of the Navajo Nation, “wild and wonderful” West Virginia is a place of intricate ridges, hollows, and white-water rivers, and it continues as a home of traditional cultures, including its indigenous ones. The mountains themselves, some of the oldest in the world, hold close the ancient sites and living descendants of the tribal peoples who have been here for thousands of years. As archeologist Edward V. McMichael noted, they have existed in West Virginia for at least 13,000 years, and the European “occupation of about 300 years amounts to only three per cent, or less, of the total time the area of the State has been inhabited” by human beings (1968).

Thus, although no reservations or trust lands currently are designated in West Virginia, it would be erroneous to deny the historic and present influence of Native American heritage here. Even the more general Appalachian traditional culture reflects such values as independence, self-reliance, noninterference with others, love of the land, importance of family and “clan”—qualities often ascribed to Indian cultures and which may reflect in part the early influence Native peoples had on European immigrants as they settled here. Because of such ties, at West Virginia University, the state’s “flagship” institution of higher education, Native American Studies (NAS) has established strong roots and begun to flourish.

### **Mission Statement**

Our Native American Studies program is grounded upon a nine-point mission statement, one consistent with that of West Virginia University, a land-grant institution particularly devoted to serving the needs of the people of the state. This mission is designed to promote respect and understanding of indigenous peoples by:

1. Providing historical and contemporary information about the unique heritage of Native peoples in the Western Hemisphere
2. Identifying the special place of Native peoples in West Virginia's history and present life
3. Providing a public forum for the examination of issues concerning Native peoples
4. Offering opportunities for students and others to meet American Indians in the region and to learn of their life ways
5. Providing opportunities for the University community to hear views of outstanding American Indians
6. Facilitating research to expand our knowledge of Native peoples
7. Building library resources (books, journals, videos, films, and electronic materials) on indigenous peoples for use at WVU and elsewhere in the region
8. Bringing special programs on Native peoples to the public schools of the area
9. Providing support for Native American students on campus

In achieving our mission, the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences has provided a continuing home for the program and for the multidisciplinary Native American Studies committee that administers it. Because Arts and Sciences is central to the university and its largest college, it makes an ideal base from which to bring our message to the campus as a whole.

### ***University and Community Environment***

Founded in 1867, West Virginia University (WVU) is a Carnegie Foundation Doctoral/Research university with over 22,000 students. As a major re-

search and development institution, it enjoys strong support from the state of West Virginia and is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. WVU is comprised of 13 colleges and schools, through which 168 academic programs are offered, including Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral, and professional degrees in such areas as law, engineering, business, the creative arts, agriculture, and forestry, to name just a few. Innovative alternatives range from the Regent's degree, which allows students the flexibility to build a program of study tailored around their unique interests, to the newly created Forensic Identification degree, the first of its kind in the world.

Undergraduates comprise about two-thirds of the student body, while one-third are graduate and professional discipline trainees. The Robert C. Byrd Health Sciences Center on the WVU Health Sciences campus includes a medical school and a dental school, along with a teaching hospital and numerous other graduate health sciences training programs. The Personal Rapid Transit System connects the three WVU Morgantown campuses, which provide a pleasing mixture of modern and historic architecture (18 university buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places). In addition, there are four WVU regional campuses, four university forests, and eight experimental farms across the state. WVU maintains a web site ([www.wvu.edu](http://www.wvu.edu)) that features current information about the university and its program, and offers a virtual tour.

As a "college town" nestled on the banks of the Monongahela River, Morgantown provides a safe, intellectually stimulating environment for students attending WVU. With a population of 27,000 and located near the northern border of the state, it remains a small town within easy driving distance of Pittsburgh (one and one half hours) and Washington D.C. (three hours). A recreational haven, Morgantown is close to some of the most challenging white-water rafting and mountain biking opportunities in the country. Other popular outdoor activities include hiking, trout fishing in our mountain streams, and downhill and cross-country skiing, among many more possibilities. A popular rating system recently hailed Morgantown as the best Small City in the East.

All of these factors have made WVU attractive to a growing number of American Indian students. At least 89 now are completing their course work in programs spread across the university, and part of the mission of Native American Studies from its inception has been to "provide support" for these students.

### ***Beginning of our NAS program***

The spark igniting our Native American Studies program came from Carolyn Reyer, who had developed a lifelong interest in American Indians. She approached the university about establishing and funding a visiting professorship which would bring an outstanding Native American scholar to WVU each year. The interdisciplinary faculty committee which was formed to choose the speakers was the forerunner of the Native American Studies Committee that oversees the program today.

The first speaker, selected in 1982, was Rennard Strickland, law professor at the University of Oklahoma. Others of renown followed, including Peterson Zah, then president of the Navajo Nation; Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation; Suzan Shown Harjo, then Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians; Luci Tapahonso, Navajo poet; Elgin Badwound, former president of Oglala Lakota College; and Wilma Mankiller, then chief of the Cherokee Nation. The university hosted the area's first powwow in April of 1987, with Chief Mankiller presiding and Rob Swift Arrow Rose dazzling local audiences with fancy dancing.

Then in 1992, the country's observation of the Columbus quincentenary provided a catalyst for the creation of a grant-supported, year-long series of activities at WVU titled, "The Rediscovery: America's Indian Heritage." These activities brought to campus such notable figures as historian Dr. James Axtell, archeologist Dr. Larry Zimmerman, artist Don Tenaso, film maker and health educator Beverly Singer, storyteller Joseph Bruchac, writer and scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, flutist Robert Talltree, and the American Indian Dance Theatre. In addition, the year's events featured another pow-wow and an art exhibit, the performance of Louis Ballard's "Nanowilya—Fantasy Aborigine #5" by WVU's symphony orchestra, a Native American dinner in the student union, the creation of the NAS logo by Urban Couch, and the formation of a student organization, ONAI (the Organization of Native American Interests). Sponsors for these activities included the WVU President's Office, the Social Justice Office, the Office of Academic Affairs, the Arts and Sciences Dean's Office, and the Departments of Art, Music, Theatre, History, English, Sociology/Anthropology, and Community Medicine. Other sponsors were Sigma XI Honory, Monongalia Public Schools, the West Virginia Native American Coalition, and the West Virginia Humanities Council. The year's programming had been created with a deliberate, comprehensive approach designed to build campus-wide infrastructure for the program, and in this and other respects it was very successful.

An important part of the 1992 "Rediscovery" program was the ceremonial planting of a "Peace Tree" by Chief Leon Shenandoah, Tadodaho of the Iroquois Six Nations Confederacy. Standing across from the student union, the white pine has remained a symbolic focal point for our program, and rededication ceremonies held annually have been led by such distinguished return visitors as Chief Oren Lyons and Peterson Zah, along with such new visitors as Dr. Henrietta Mann, Cheyenne, from the University of Montana; Chief Jake Swamp of the Mohawk Nation; Lakota Firekeeper Claude Two Elk; and traditional storyteller Freeman Owle from the Eastern Band of the Cherokee.

Other activities over the years, including WVU's premier lecture series, "The Festival of Ideas," have allowed us and other units across the university to attract additional eminent Native speakers to campus. These speakers have included Lori Arviso Alvord, first Navajo woman surgeon; Osage writer Linda Hogan; Laguna Pueblo scholar and writer Paula Gunn Allen; and Inuit elder,

Angaangaq Lyberth, to name just a few.

Another way we have striven to fulfill our mission has been to take our students off campus to interact with indigenous peoples in a variety of settings. For example, senior nursing students have traveled with faculty to the Pine Ridge reservation and volunteered at an Indian Health Service outpatient clinic. Graduate psychology and dentistry students have traveled west to reservation areas to volunteer health services and to collect research data. Others have visited a mental health clinic on the Seneca Nation, gone to the Navajo Nation to explore linkages in education, completed their major's "capstone course" by volunteering at a clinic on the Choctaw reservation, and traveled to Peterboro, Ontario to learn from First Nations' elders brought together annually at Trent University's Elders and Traditional Peoples Gathering. These and other "out-of-the-classroom" experiences continue to enhance what we can offer to our students.

A unique opportunity for WVU students is a summer internship in Native American Studies developed by our program in partnership with the National Park Service at the Fort Necessity National Battlefield in nearby Farmington, Pennsylvania. Living on site, students learn regional Eastern Woodland Native culture and history, particularly from the eighteenth century including events of the French and Indian Wars. As part of this experience, they complete "hands-on" projects with the guidance of a regional Native person, conduct research in the facility's archives, learn how to interpret the area's history with a stronger Indian viewpoint represented, and under supervision by park personnel, begin to work with the general public. Because of this internship and other innovative programs, Fort Necessity has been recognized by the National Park Service as being "at the forefront" of broadening its approach to include a more balanced interpretation of the past and of discussing with park visitors the myths and stereotypes about Indians that linger in the present. After completing these internships, WVU students have gone on to graduate school or been hired at other regional sites to begin supplying the "Indian side" to the historical narratives presented to the public (Bowman, 2001).

### ***Our Academic Program***

After our "Rediscovery" celebrations of 1992, faculty interested in Native American Studies continued meeting on a regular basis and expanding the program, one unprecedented not only on our campus but around the central Appalachian region. Courses already being taught were identified by the newly formed Native American Studies Committee and more offerings were created. By 1997, the Native American Studies minor had been passed by the Faculty Senate and now is a permanent part of university curriculum.

The minor requires that students complete at least 15 hours of course work in Native American Studies, with nine of those hours taken in three core offerings:

\*Introduction to American Indian Studies: a course which provides a general introduction to the cultures of Native peoples from across the country, with an emphasis on contemporary issues.

\*American Indian Literature: a course which covers a wide range of materials, from traditional stories and narratives from oral sources to contemporary pieces originating on the written page.

\*American Indian History: a course which surveys the history of Native peoples of what is now the United States, using an ethnocultural approach which emphasizes cultural development as well as interactions with European and American peoples and policies.

Other regularly offered courses include independent studies where students work individually with faculty experts in the areas of their chosen projects, and a field experience course which allows students to gain academic credit for off-campus related travel, internships, service projects, etc.

Special topics courses from across disciplines are also offered on an ad-hoc basis that reflect the ongoing interests of both students and faculty. A sampling of such courses in the past includes American Indian Women Writers (given in collaboration with WVU's Women's Studies Program), Native American Mental Health Issues, North American Indian Ethnography, American Indian Art, etc. For the 2001-2002 academic year, new special topics courses in American Indians in fiction and film (English), and Native American Child and Family Studies (Family and Consumer Sciences) are under development. Rounding out what students may take are courses having at least a partial focus on indigenous peoples, including such examples as Latin America: Culture, Conquest, Colonization (History); History of American Colonial Society 1607-1763 (History); Ethnic Groups (Sociology); and Comparative Family Studies (Family and Consumer Sciences).

### ***Faculty and Staff Committed to Excellence***

Because American Indian Studies is an evolving field of study and expanding rapidly, faculty responsible for the NAS academic program believe ongoing scholarly work is vital to fulfilling our mission of "providing historical and contemporary information about the unique heritage of Native people in the Western hemisphere" and "facilitating research to expand our knowledge of Native peoples." Funds from the program enable NAS faculty more fully to pursue their scholarly activities and to present their findings at conferences around the country, including WVU's own *Colloquium on Literature and Film*, with special sessions devoted entirely to Native American topics. Research being pursued by our NAS members includes a number of diverse disciplines

and often involves students, adding to their training.

Carolyn Reyer, the program's founder, has taught courses in English, Sociology, and Women's Studies over the years, and she has produced two books and is working on a third. The first of these, *Cante ohitiki Win* (1991), focuses on photographs and descriptions of Lakota women from the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. The second, *An Indian in White America* (1994), is an autobiographical/biographical work (edited by Reyer) on the life of Mark Monroe.

Recently, another program member, Anna Schein, co-edited the book, *Treaty of Canandaigua 1794: 200 Years of Treaty Relations between the Iroquois Confederacy and the United States* (2000). A librarian at WVU's main library, Schein is the bibliographer for Native American Studies and has developed an expertise in intercultural contemporary history documentation with indigenous peoples. She is a member of the international media documentation team for Tombouctou 2000 in Mali, West Africa. Her documentary photographs have been published in various media and archived in the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, and the Mali National Archives.

Dan McNeil, an associate professor of clinical psychology, focuses his work on empirical, quantitative psychological research in the area of negative emotions—part of a larger program of research on anxiety, fear, depression, and pain. This research effort includes special groups, such as Appalachian and other rural individuals, as well as American Indians and Alaska Natives. With colleagues, including students at WVU, he has published this research in refereed, archival journals (e.g., McNeil, Porter, Zvolensky, Chaney, and Kee, 2000; Zvolensky, McNeil, Porter, and Stewart, 2001).

It is this variety and breadth of expertise of its members that sustains the NAS program and has allowed it to grow. For example, Carol Markstrom, an associate professor in the Family and Consumer Sciences Division of the College of Agriculture and Forestry, has published research on psychosocial functioning among children and adolescents related to ethnic differences (e.g., Markstrom-Adams and Adams, 1995; Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Ann Paterson, an associate professor of sociology, has provided administrative leadership for Native American Studies on the WVU campus from its inception in 1981-82 through 1998 when the NAS minor was officially approved. Urban Couch, now a professor emeritus of art, remains dedicated to serving the program through his painting. For example, an acrylic piece titled "The Beginning of the American Holocaust" depicts the chronological history of Native Americans after European contact. He also has been working with Native people around the state to develop a Native American Commission for West Virginia.

Finally, Ellesa High has focused on our mission to identify "the special place of Native peoples in West Virginia's history and present" and to offer "opportunities for students and others to meet Native peoples in the region and to learn of their lifeways." An associate professor of English, she has researched

and written about the region in both scholarly and creative work for more than two decades. In addition to directing the NAS program for the past three years, she is writing a book concerning the history of the indigenous tribes of the state, work which has been supported by grants from across the university and by the West Virginia Humanities Council.

### *Student Development and Mentoring*

West Virginia University has prided itself on being a student-centered institution, and Native American Studies is no exception. Student mentoring and development is an integral component of the NAS program. To foster frequent and positive contact between students and faculty/staff, program meetings are open to and attended by undergraduate student representatives as well as by interested graduate students. Students involved in NAS (Native American Studies) are active in scholarly activities, including research and artistic creations. For example, Michael Zvolensky and Marvin Kee (Navajo), both of whom were graduate clinical psychology students, are published authors, based on work they did while at WVU, on culturally-related anxiety in American Indians and Alaska Natives.

To foster such growth, program funds, as well as enrichment funds from the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences, support student research, travel, and participation in other educational opportunities.

In addition, the program awards exceptional academic and artistic student work. For example, Mary Marra, an art student of Cherokee descent, was honored by the NAS at last year's Colloquium of Language and Literature for her multimedia piece, "Knowledge, Identity, and Strength," which draws upon imagery from the Eastern Woodland tribes. Furthermore, an outstanding senior in Native American Studies is chosen annually to be honored at a special, year-end ceremony held by the College. Our 2001 outstanding senior is William R. Lyons Jr., a West Virginian of Shawnee/Cherokee descent who will be continuing his education by beginning Master's-level work in computer science in the fall.

An important component of the NAS experience at WVU is supplied by its recognized student group on campus, the Organization of Native American Interests (ONAI). A faculty member advises this group, and many NAS faculty belong to the organization. Through its drum, ONAI participates in local powwows and is invited to gatherings by regional Native friends who continue to teach them traditions from our part of the Eastern Woodlands. ONAI members fulfill many service needs and opportunities, not only on campus but throughout the area. They have provided programs on regional Native heritage to local schools, ranging from preschools and high schools to neighboring community colleges. A major ONAI undertaking has been the American Indian Heritage Festival celebrated every year on campus and featuring an array of lectures,



films, speakers, and related events.

Other service activities have included food and clothing drives for needy Native people within the state and beyond its borders, and preservation of regional history and resources. This year, for example, ONAI (Organization of Native American) worked with NAS members, local Native citizens and a concerned landowner to build a protective structure over a petroglyph located about an hour's drive from campus. In this way, ONAI embodies its four-point credo of education, preservation, spirituality, and service.

### ***Program Support and Resources***

Basic operating funds for the NAS program are generously provided through the university's Eberly College of Arts and Sciences. Additionally, two endowments have been established to support its activities. First, the "Carolyn Reyer Endowment for Native American Studies" was established in 1993 by our program's founder. This endowment guarantees permanent support of student and faculty activities related to Native American cultures, including teaching courses, student travel and research, faculty development, campus-wide speakers and festivals, and student/faculty exchanges. Secondly, a library endowment was established through faculty, staff, and friends of WVU Native American Studies, and the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences, to provide a separate source of funding for the procurement of books and other archival material related to American Indians and Alaska Natives. These funds have helped to create a Native American Studies collection of books, films, photographs, and other media, which is housed in the university library.

### ***Future Directions***

With the support of the university, the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences, Carolyn Reyer and other giving individuals, as well as the ongoing effort of faculty, staff, and students, WVU's Native American Studies Program is thriving in what to many seems like an unlikely place: the Appalachian Mountains. To continue striving for excellence and to more fully identify and develop an understanding of the unique indigenous heritage our region has to offer, the program is undertaking the following endeavors:

\*Enhancing our work with tribes across the nation to identify their educational needs and to attract more American Indian students here. WVU is eager to recruit increasing numbers of Native students, and we are developing new avenues through which to mentor and serve these students once they are on campus.

\*Working with our newly created "Visiting Committee" or advisory board for the NAS program composed of community and Native leaders from around the hemisphere. With their guidance, the program will enhance its

course offerings and strategically plan for future growth, including major fund-raising projects to create more scholarships and other kinds of support for our students.

\*Continuing to network with indigenous programs across the country, not only to learn from more established centers, but also to support and assist in any possible way the development of American Indian Studies as a discipline.

\*Hosting a three-day conference focused on Eastern Woodland American Indian history and cultures, particularly of central Appalachia. Building on our partnership with the National Park Service, our two institutions have jointly planned this conference to be held at WVU on October 12-14, 2001. This conference will provide an unusual mix of scholarly lectures and panels, hands-on demonstrations, special programming for public school children, an art exhibit, a poster session, and field trips to regional historic sites. With all events free and open to the public, it is our goal not only to raise awareness of the rich tribal heritage we have here, but also to encourage the gathering and sharing of information concerning the indigenous peoples of our region.

The Allegheny range of the Appalachians surrounds our campus, and these ridges take their name from a word expressing the Lenape concept of eternity. In its own way, the Native American Studies Program at West Virginia University remains committed to its mission of promoting respect for and understanding of Native peoples, both now and in the years to come.

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The authors are grateful to all members of the Native American Studies Committee at West Virginia University who contributed information to this article. They especially wish to thank Ann Paterson for supplying material concerning the program during the 1980s. For the most up-to-date information concerning the program, please consult our website: [www.as.wvu.edu/nas/](http://www.as.wvu.edu/nas/)

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