



teaching learning committee
Montana State University Bozeman

Native American Students

John Watts, Assistant Director
American Indian Research Opportunities
Montana State University-Bozeman

One American Indian student described his reactions when he first came to Montana State University. He was in a speech communication class, and the teacher's instructions for the students' first speech were "be sure to make eye contact and project your voice loudly to be heard throughout the room." This young man became anxious. He had been taught that making eye contact or looking directly at others was combative and confrontational. He had heard elders speak in soft, even tones, and he had learned that to speak loudly is to speak boastfully. Furthermore, the other students seemed to be rewarded for rude behavior. The best students seemed to want the spotlight and relish confrontations with professors and the other students.

To be effective with American Indian students, you must be attuned to their different learning styles and cultural backgrounds. Recently a group of MSU Indian students in the American Indian Research Opportunities program participated in a discussion about their experiences at MSU. They offer several suggestions for those teaching Native American students.

"Don't stereotype us."

Indian students at Montana State University may come from one of seven different reservations in Montana, or they may be from an urban setting such as Billings. Or they could be members of an out-of-state tribe. Each tribe has its own beliefs, codes of behavior, and values. Moreover, some Indian students have been taught to follow their traditional cultures while others have adopted the values of the dominant culture. Some Indian students are well-prepared, while others face challenges adapting to the college environment. No generalization applies to all Indian students.

"I can't speak on behalf of all Indians."

Teachers sometimes place unwarranted stress on Indian students in classes where the content relates to American Indians. They call on the Indian students to give the Native American

perspective. This demand can make the students feel uncomfortable because they know that there is a wide variety of viewpoints among Native Americans; no individual can be an expert on every aspect of Indian culture. You should not assume that all Indian students are well acquainted with their own heritage. However, Indian students can be valuable resources. An appropriate strategy is to speak with them before hand to see if they have knowledge on a topic and if they feel comfortable speaking about it.

“We’re not angry about the past; we are upset about today’s racism.”

Indian students, especially those from reservations, have boldly stepped into the very different world of the university, but they are sensitive to racism whether it is intentional or unintentional.

“We are family-oriented.”

Strong connections to extended family, a strength back home, may impose hardships on students attending school. They may be expected to go home for funerals even for relatives who you may consider distant. Indian students who come from reservations are far from their homes, families, and support systems. They may feel that they are living in an alien culture, which may contribute to their being lonely and depressed.

“If we’re quiet, that doesn’t mean we are not paying attention.”

This conduct may arise from a variety of sources including the desire not to show themselves as being better than other Indian students or not to appear to act “white.” Many Indian students prefer to blend in rather than stand out.

“Our thought processes may be different.”

Studies of American Indian cognition (cited in Wright 59) indicate that there “may be important differences in perceptions of the world, of time, of the emotional content of nonverbal vocalizations, and of the meaning of teachers’ behavior between American Indians and Anglos.”

“English may not be our first language.”

A few students may speak English as a second language, so they may be reticent about speaking up in class or may need to use tutoring services such as the Writing Center.

“We don’t want special treatment; we just want a fair chance.”

You should make yourself available to assist American Indian students who need help, but you should not assume that because a student is Indian, his or her academic preparation is weak.

The following suggestions are culled from research into teaching American Indians and other minorities. Many of these strategies also apply to non-Indian students. In fact, non-Indian rural students share some of the culture shock that Indian students may experience when they arrive at MSU. Also, they may not apply to every Indian student. So the best advice is to remain flexible and use a variety of teaching strategies and learning activities

- Practice personal warmth plus high expectations
- Respect cultural differences.
- Learn the cultural resources of your students.
- Develop multiple instructional approaches.
- Be aware of the ways you ask questions.
- Remember some students do not like to be “spotlighted” in front of a group.
- Be aware of proximity preferences – how close is comfortable?

Advance By Choice

The goal of ABC is to increase the retention and graduation rates of eligible participants, defined as first generation, low income, and /or physically disabled. The program provides counseling, small group tutorials, basic skills course work, and study skills instruction.

146 SUB, 994-4541

Affirmative Action Office

Montana State University is working to institute specific programs designed to enhance the human potential of faculty and staff, thereby increasing opportunities for career advancement on campus. The Affirmative Action Office is responsible for ensuring a nondiscriminatory setting for all MSU employees and students and monitoring MSU's compliance with all state and federal laws.

210-C Montana Hall, 994-2042

American Indian Research Opportunities

AIRO is the umbrella organization for minority programs. Those available to MSU students are the Initiative for Minority Student Development (IMSD) and the Leadership Alliance.

312 Roberts Hall, 994-5847

American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES)

A nationally recognized organization, the MSU chapter provides support for science and engineering students and assists with recruitment of high school students to MSU programs.

Center for Bilingual/ Multicultural Education

The Center's objective is to promote the philosophy of bilingual/multicultural education on the MSU campus and support activities that promote multicultural understanding among the culturally and linguistically different populations in the northwest region.

140 Reid Hall, 994-1930

Native American Studies Department

The department offers academic opportunities to students wishing to minor in Native American Studies or those wishing to take core courses focusing on Native American issues. Students may also earn a Master of Arts in Native American Studies. The department also maintains a full-time advisor and works cooperatively with the American Indian Club to meet the needs of Indian students.

2-179 Wilson Hall, 994-3881

The seven reservations in Montana:

- Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation (Chippewa and Cree)
- Blackfeet Indian Reservation (Blackfeet)
- Flathead Indian Reservation (Salish and Kootenai)
- Fort Peck Indian Reservation (Assiniboine and Sioux)
- Fort Belknap Indian reservation (Gros Ventre and Assiniboine)
- Crow Indian Reservation (Crow)
- Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation (Northern Cheyenne)

Bryan, William L., Jr. *Montana's Indians Yesterday and Today*. Helena: American and World Geographic Publishing, 1996.

Clark, Marj ed. *Through Two Pairs of Eyes: A Manual for Teachers of American Indian College Students*. Bozeman: Human Resources/Affirmative Action Office, Montana State University, 1992.

Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. *The Indian in the Classroom: Readings for the Teacher with Indian Students*. Helena: Montana Department of Education.

Wright, Bobby. Teaching the Culturally Different: A Manual for Teachers of American Indian College Students. Bozeman: Montana State University Center for Native American Studies, 1986.