

# Nurturing Native Americans on Campus

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Debby Tewa struggled with college. She dropped out after two years. Having grown up on the Hopi reservation, she had attended schools in Arizona and California before heading to Northern Arizona University (NAU) in Flagstaff. "I was totally unprepared," she says. "I kind of felt lost." If there were extra supports, Ms. Tewa didn't know about them.

More than a decade (10 years) after leaving NAU, and working as an electrician, Tewa came back to finish her bachelor's degree. This time, she found extra academic and mentoring programs. Colleges around the country may need to create programs like these to improve retention rates (staying in school and finishing) for Native American students.

In the US, only about 15% of Native American 12th-graders who are likely to attend college actually graduate within eight years. For tribes, that makes it difficult to find people with enough education to fill important roles.

But there's no easy solution. Many Native Americans feel like they don't fit in or miss home. They may face issues like prejudice, not enough money, language issues, and alcoholism. More than 90% considered leaving college at some point.

For the Native American students that do succeed, they report that finding some professors who were caring and culturally sensitive was very important. The report recommended adding more Indian history into the curriculum and making sure the campus had native role models.

The change in curriculum is what made Tewa want to come back to school. She saw a brochure for Applied Indigenous Studies, a program that teaches students both traditional native knowledge and Western academics--and equips them to apply their skills in indigenous communities. Paired with a minor in environmental studies, it was a perfect fit for Tewa, who had been working to bring solar energy to parts of reservations that were still without electricity.

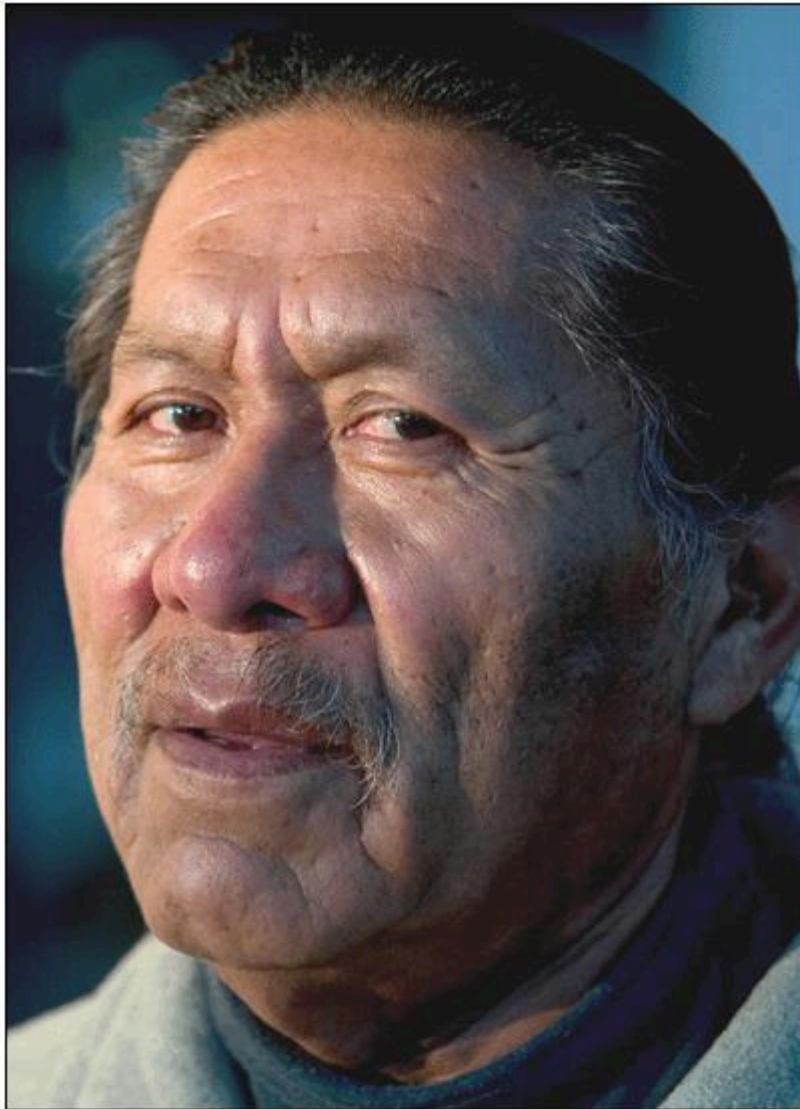
For the first time, Tewa's classes covered the history of native Americans. But she also learned things that were useful for her work.



Octaviana Trujillo

Department chair Octaviana Trujillo is proud that the program was designed with tribal leaders and is a full academic department. About 40 students major in it each year, concentrating on everything from law to economics.

The department plays another important role. A few years ago the department brought in James Peshlakai, a Navajo "Keeper of the Way," as he calls himself (preferring that to labels such as "medicine man"). He teaches the students and other staff members the songs and ceremonies that transmit Navajo culture. He is also able to help people understand Native American culture and experiences.



MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN—STAFF

James Peshlakai

Last fall, two more resident elders joined him—Bob Lomadafkie, a Hopi, and Marina Vasquez, a Mayan from Mexico. "As an elder, our position is nonthreatening, because we have no influence on their grades," Mr. Lomadafkie says. "We encourage them to seek out tutoring, or if they need financial help or psychological help, we can guide them to [the right resources]."

The hope is that Indian students won't drop out when they struggle if they can turn to these mentors. Only 29% of first-time native American freshmen graduate within six years, according to the institutional planning office.

Temashio Anderson, a recent graduate, grew up on the Navajo and Pomo Indian reservations. "The resident elders are very important," he says. "Sometimes you do need somebody to talk to--that understands, that's been through these different problems before....They always welcome you with open arms--kind of like your grandpa or grandma."

Now Mr. Anderson has bachelor's degrees in both environmental science and applied indigenous studies, and he hopes to continue studying uranium contamination on the Navajo reservation. He always consults with native leaders and residents to shape his projects, even though it can slow things down. Anderson is part of a new tradition that "really stresses that research needs to be done for the [native] people, and it needs to ultimately benefit the people."

## Statistics

- 166,000: The number of American Indians and Alaskan native students in higher education in 2002, more than twice as many as in 1976.
- 11.5%: Percentage of the native American population age 25 and older who had at least a bachelor's degree in 2000 (compared with 24.4 percent for the overall population).
- 60%: Percentage of enrolled native Americans who are female.

- 56%: Percentage of native American full-time undergraduates who received financial aid (similar to average for all groups).
- 0.5%: Percentage of native American full-time faculty members at degree-granting institutions in 2001 (native Americans are about 1.5 percent of the US population).