

HIGHER LEARNING



GARY M. BROWN

Blackfoot Community College, whose campus in Browning, Montana, is not far from Glacier National Park, provides an education that includes classes in the Blackfoot language and culture, as well as classes in computer technology and accounting.

TERRY WHITRIGHT, president of Blackfoot Community College, closes his office at noon to take me to lunch at the college cafeteria. No one is there. ☹ “Where has everyone gone?” he asks of nobody in particular. ☹ The spotlessly clean, tiled hallways are quiet. The bookstore is dark, as are most of the offices. The family that runs the cafeteria has closed the lunch counter and disappeared. Outside, a late-April wind dusts snow over the treeless plains that surround the 4-acre campus on the Blackfoot Reservation in northwestern Montana. The bleak skies seem to echo the emptiness of a campus that on a Monday mid-

day should be busy with student life. Five hundred and thirty-nine students are enrolled here. Where are they?

We get the answer from Darlene Peterson, secretary of the student services department, who explains that while Whitright and I were meeting, a 60-year-old tribal member, with eight daughters and many grandchildren, died in the hospital of a chronic illness. The members of his large extended family, which includes Whitright, dropped what they were doing to go to the hospital or offer their sympathy at the family home. Whitright says he will also leave, later in the day, to offer comfort.

"Nearly everyone here is related," he muses. "This [the mass departure from campus] is an example of what I mean when I say that for us, family comes before everything. Here such a thing is understood." A college off the reservation, he implies, wouldn't be so understanding.

Whitright, a Blackfeet grandfather of 17 who has a liberal arts degree from the University of Montana and a master's degree in education from Harvard, is a slight man who wears his long, dark hair pulled back in a loose braid. As our morning meeting wrapped up, he was patiently explaining why many Blackfeet people have been reluctant to leave the reservation to go to college. "They encounter culture shock. Customs, ideas, values, even the pace of life are different," he told me. Now he gestures at the empty cafeteria. "We tend to stay on the reservation so we can be close to our extended family. They are our support system."

The majestic Rocky Mountains of Glacier National Park fill the horizon a scant 12 miles west of the reservation town of Browning, where the college is located. To the east, the plains seem to go on forever. They are windswept and chilly for eight months of the year, and nearly bare of vegetation. Many of the people in Browning, home of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council offices, live in government-built tract homes with yards bare of adornment. There is little energy for landscaping when many residents are struggling with poverty.

Unemployment on the 1.5 million-acre reservation runs as high as 85 percent, except during the summer, when seasonal tourism-related jobs are available, says Lea Whitford, a Blackfeet studies instructor at

TRIBAL COLLEGE PRESERVES THE PAST WHILE PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE



GARY M. BROWN

BY SCOTT DRISCOLL

the community college. Then it drops to about 55 percent.

That's in keeping with unemployment on most tribal reservations, which averages 60 percent or more, according to Paul Boyer, author of "Native American Colleges," a 1997 report to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

The Blackfeet—named for their blackened moccasins, which may have been colored by paint or from prairie-fire soot—were known for their courage and fierceness when they roamed the northern plains. Their slide into a life of dependence on the U.S. government began in 1855 with the signing of the first treaty that defined a certain territory in which the nomadic tribe could live. The disappearance of the buffalo—the last hunt was in 1888—delivered the coup de grâce. In 1895, in an attempt to live self-suffi-

ciently, the tribe sold a portion of its land—the 1 million-plus acres that now make up Glacier National Park—to the U.S. government for \$1.5 million, says Darrell Norman, a Blackfeet historian. But the money, provided in annual payments over 15 years, was all spent each year for food, clothing and shelter, he says.

Loss of the tribe's traditional way of life led to erosion of the Blackfeet language, he says. For years, the language had been passed on to children through oral traditions—via storytelling and mentoring as young people were taught how to make weapons and tools, hunt for and prepare food, tan hides and care for tepees. Not only did many of these aspects of Blackfeet life wane when the tribe moved to ever-shrinking reservation lands, the government sent Blackfeet children to missions and boarding schools that punished them for speaking in their native tongue, says Norman. Today, only 20 percent of Blackfeet speak their native tongue fluently. With the loss of their language, his people lost touch with their identity, he says.

"In the past, Indian reservations did not control their own education," notes Gerald Gipp, executive director of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, a group of 35 tribal colleges in North America. "The message we received from mainstream educators was that where we came from [culturally] was not important. This resulted in a lot of failure. Our people have remained at the lowest levels of poverty, education and employment as a result of the attempt to remove any and all Indian cultural influence from our education."

The founding of tribal colleges represents the most significant development in American Indian communities since World War II, Paul Boyer tells me when I call to discuss his study. "Rather



GARY M. BROWN

Above: Students work on projects in the college's Learning Center.



Left, top to bottom: College president Terry Whitright; Blackfeet language and history instructor Marvin Weatherwax; 77-year-old student Flora Running Crane, who mentors other students.



SCOTT DRISCOLL (3)

than teach about tribal cultures as though they were museum pieces, the way mainstream institutions do, tribal colleges imbed their cultural knowledge and language into the teaching."

The Navajo Nation created the country's first tribal college, Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona, which opened in 1968. The college was made possible in part by the 1965 U.S. Higher Education Act, which provided aid to developing education institutions. By 1972, five more colleges had been established—most of them in Montana and the Dakotas—and the six schools formed the American Indian Higher Education Consortium to act as a governing body.

"In the early days, classes ... were taught in leftover government buildings or old trailers," reports Boyer. "Students—and teachers—parked their beat-up cars in gravel lots and did without most campus 'extras,' including faculty offices, cafeterias, student lounges or well-stocked libraries."

Despite such modest beginnings, today there are colleges in 12 states—including Arizona, California, Montana and Washington—and in Alberta, Canada.

One of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium's main goals is to promote opportunities in areas critical to success in the 21st century, such as science and information technology, while nurtur-

ing and protecting American Indian history, culture, art and language, Gipp says.

Preparing Native Americans to meet the demands of modern work life while retaining their cultural traditions and pride lays the groundwork for personal and professional success, according to tribal leaders. "Education," notes Norman, the Blackfeet historian, "is really about learning how to survive in your society."

He describes Blackfeet Community College as a phoenix rising out of the ashes of his tribe's cultural decline. Chartered by the Tribal Council in 1974 and accredited by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges in 1985, it provides higher education to a geographically isolated population. The closest sizable city is Kalispell, approximately 100 miles west.

The college's remote location, enrollment of fewer than 1,000 students and eclectic curriculum make it representative of most tribal colleges. Classes such as Computer Programming, Principles of Accounting, Microbiology and Business Management prepare students for jobs. Classes such as Blackfeet Language, Blackfeet Singing and Dancing, and Blackfeet Chiefs and Societies preserve and foster Blackfeet traditions. Indeed, according to the college's mission statement, the school's most important function is "to serve as a living memorial to the Blackfeet Tribe, in preserving the traditions and culture of a proud and progressive people."

"The Blackfeet Community College has been one of the guiding lights in the preservation of culture and language," says Boyer. "The tribal colleges help preserve their culture by institutionalizing it, which can be the only way to ensure its survival if there is not a critical mass of fluent speakers."

College classes began to be conducted on the Blackfeet Reservation in 1976 after tribal leaders arranged for extension courses to be offered through Kalispell's Flathead Valley Community College. Blackfeet Community College began operating as an independent institution in 1979, with start-up funds provided by the federal Higher Education Act.

The college now occupies 12 modern, well-lit buildings, employs 40 instructors, has a 15-computer Learning Center and maintains a library with more than 13,000 volumes. Facilities have come a long way since the days when extension classes took place in various old buildings on the reservation, including the former commissary, which was more than 50 years old

SUPPORT FOR TRIBAL COLLEGES

Funding to start North America's 35 tribal colleges has come largely from the U.S. government, whose Higher Education Act provides aid to developing schools. Ongoing operations are funded partly via the Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act, which reimburses tribal colleges approximately \$3,900 a year per enrolled Native student.

That's well below the \$12,000 it costs on average per student to provide a two-year degree, according to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), which serves as a governing body for all the tribal colleges. To help fund operations and programs, AIHEC also raises money from sources such as foundations and corporations. The American Indian College Fund, formed by AIHEC in 1989, raises funds for scholarships to help students with tribal-college tuition, which averages \$2,060 a year for a full-time student. Students are also offered jobs on campus, and receive financial assistance from federal programs such as Pell grants.

The tribal colleges, which may be either public or private institutions, and may or may not receive state appropriations and grants, also individually raise money—from foundations, corporations and individuals—to fund operations and provide scholarships.

Some of the money goes to scholarships for non-Native students. All tribal colleges have open enrollment, and non-Native American students who live on or near the reservation may decide to attend a tribal college because it's the closest school to their home. These students make up about 20 percent of the colleges' student bodies, says Diane Cullo, the consortium's director of development and communications.

Student populations at the tribal colleges range from a few hundred students to 4,500 students per campus, Cullo says. The majority of tribal-college students—62 percent—are women, and the average age of students is 27, she says.

American Indian College Fund statistics for fall semester 2002 show that 16,882 full- and part-time students were enrolled in the 34 tribal colleges that are affiliated with the fund. Graduation figures are not yet available for the 2002-2003 academic year that ended in June 2003, but during the 2001-2002 academic year, when fall enrollment was also around 17,000 students, tribal colleges granted 1,277 associate degrees, and 823 technical or vocational certificates in areas such as computer programming and construction.

Eleven of the tribal colleges now offer four-year degrees, and five offer graduate programs. In the 2001-2002 school year, 186 students received bachelor's degrees and 12 received master's degrees.

The consortium's goal is to increase the number of tribal colleges to around 50 in the next five to 10 years, Cullo says, so that most sizable reservations in the northern plains and Southwest will have their own colleges. —S.D.

and had holes in some of the floors.

In 1978, six female students became the first graduates of the college program. One of those graduates, Julene Pepion-Kennerly, who was 38 at the time, went on to become the first Indian woman to serve as mayor of a U.S. city after she was elected mayor of Browning in 1983. She also worked as Indian education specialist for Gonzaga University in Spokane, and as a human rights specialist for the city of Salem, Oregon. "I attribute those accomplishments to Blackfeet Community College," says Pepion-Kennerly, who is now the college's dean of academic affairs. "It developed leadership and self-sufficiency."

From 1978 through 2002, 945 students—12 percent of the Blackfeet Tribe's average count of 8,000 on-reservation enrolled members, and 17 percent of enrolled members ages 18 and older—have graduated with associate degrees in areas such as education, computer-and-information science, human services, business management, pre-nursing and Native American studies. One-year certificate programs are available in areas such as construction, heavy-equipment operation and food-and-beverage services.

One-hundred-twenty-three students graduated with associate degrees last year, and 90 students received one-year certificates, says Ron Blomquist, who is directing a program to bring better technology and information systems to the college.

He notes that for years, the majority of the reservation's high school students did not pursue any higher education immediately after they graduated. Today, at least partly as a result of increasing emphasis on higher education since the college started, about 60 percent of the approximately 115 students who graduate from the reservation's two high schools each year go directly to colleges and universities, he says, with an estimated 20 percent of those students enrolling in Blackfeet Community College.

In addition, many tribal members pursue higher education long after leaving high school. For most of the college's history, the typical student has been a single mother in her 30s who had three or four children and wanted to find or improve employment opportunities. Indian men were more likely to see schooling as the white man's way of forcing assimilation, Blomquist says. But over the past few years, as the college has offered more classes directly tied to job opportunities in areas such as computers and construction, more men have been enrolling. College enroll-

ment is now split almost evenly between men and women.

Above the main door of the Blackfeet College atrium hangs a horned buffalo skull, a tribute to a lost way of life. The campus's Medicine Springs Library holds an irreplaceable Blackfeet archive, including titles such as *Blackfeet Physics*, *Sacred Circles* and *The Ways of My Grandmothers*. A trophy case outside the campus bookstore not only displays basketball trophies, it showcases buffalo skulls, Native beadwork and paintings of traditional Blackfeet life done on bleached deer or elk bones.

Behind the Blackfeet Studies Room—a modern classroom decorated with Indian artifacts and pictures—lies the Ceremony Room. Built on a circular floor plan, it simulates the interior of a tepee. Murals on the walls were painted by students to represent their families and life on the plains. A sand-filled fire pit occupies the middle of the room and is used during prayer ceremonies and sacred pipe ceremonies. Students sit on the floor, their backs leaning against tripods of willow branches tied together at the top with a leather strap, in Blackfeet tradition.

The ceremonies and other cultural activities are important aspects of the Blackfeet Community College experience, says Kevin, a 36-year-old sophomore who plans to graduate with an associate degree in Blackfeet studies. He appreciates the way the college blends cultural and modern instruction. "It's important in today's world to know how to use computers and the Internet, while the cultural part is important to me as a Blackfeet man," he says. "Also, when you take classes at the college, every Native person there has something to offer in terms of communicating and sharing the culture. You can learn something from everybody."

He also benefits from close relationships with his teachers, he says. "I've taken a few classes here and there at other colleges, and I was just kind of a statistic. No one really cared. At Blackfeet College, you have teachers who know you."

Kevin returned to school after a stint in the Navy and seven years on a U.S. Forest Service fire-fighting crew. He injured his knees while fire-fighting, and he now takes night classes at the community college while working full time at Browning Middle School to support his family of four children. He has Class 7 American Indian Language and Culture Specialist

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certification from the state—granted to people who are authorized to teach a Native language even though they don't have a standard four-year degree—and he teaches Blackfeet studies at the middle school. But he wants to get a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from the University of Montana that will allow him to teach anywhere in Montana and will open the door to education-related work across the United States. "My goal is to go all over the country and educate non-Natives in our perspective so they will understand it," he says.

To make sure Native students understand Blackfeet perspectives and culture, the college actively works to incorporate the culture into even mainstream classes, Whitright says. "Students are not only allowed, but encouraged, to express their vision, using recognized symbols in their writing and art."

For example, Blackfeet know that a buffalo won't run from a storm, but will put its head down and face into it. A student might say in a paper that his vision is telling him to be like the buffalo, meaning that he has chosen to take his troubles head-on. "Being allowed to express their vision using our symbols strengthens that person's attachment to their own tradition," Whitright says. In English classes as well as Blackfeet language classes, instructors attempt to include Blackfeet terms, such as *iyikinen*, which translates as "a spirit voice talking," for radio, or *estat pooy*, "you can talk," in place of "telephone."

Whitright, who taught Blackfeet history at the college in the 1980s, adds that his students' essays often had "a lot of mistakes in grammar that would have made sense in Blackfeet." He was sensitive to these mistakes, pointing them out so that students could write acceptable Modern Language Association-style college papers, but without grading down because of them. "I saw a lot of incomplete sentences, for instance, because they carried on a conversation in their minds using Blackfeet phrases, and then wrote as they would have spoken," he says.

Even though students may not be fluent in Blackfeet, their vocabularies include many Blackfeet words, and the Blackfeet style of speaking in phrases is an aspect of their culture they have retained, Whitright says.

Blackfeet culture is also taken into account in other matters, such as irregular attendance. For instance, although the Blackfeet Beading and Sewing class, fully enrolled at 36 at the start of spring quarter,

has dropped to 12, this decline is, in Whwright's view, a remnant of life shaped around the buffalo hunt. "In the old way, people might drop everything to devote two weeks to an important ceremony. Then you hunted for a time. Then you were fine."

Translation: Students stay away when other matters seem more pressing.

Students who return to class arrange with the teacher how to make up the work they missed, although students who never return and haven't officially withdrawn receive a failing grade.

Evidence of how students fare after they've completed a degree at tribal colleges is largely anecdotal because the colleges often lack staff and resources for extensive data collection. However, Blomquist, the information-systems-program director at Blackfeet Community College, estimates that 50 percent of students who start school at the college earn associate degrees, and more than 30 percent of the graduates go on to pursue more college education, often at the University of Montana in Missoula. Approximately 70 percent of the graduates who go on to a university receive bachelor's degrees.

In addition, some students transfer to a four-year institution even before they complete their associate degrees, Blomquist says, although the college does not have statistics on the number.

U.S. Department of Education post-secondary education studies stress that community colleges serve many needs—including those of students who want to take just a few classes for personal growth or to improve job skills, or want just a one-year certificate—so degrees awarded are not the only measure of whether the colleges are serving their communities.

A Department of Education report on postsecondary students nationwide who began their college education in 1995-96 at public community colleges showed that 11 percent entered the colleges with no plans to get a degree or certificate, or to transfer to a four-year institution; 40 percent intended to earn a certificate or associate degree and not go beyond that point; and 49 percent intended to transfer to four-year institutions, with or without getting an associate degree first.

The report, released in June 2003, was based on a representative sample of the country's more than 1,600 community colleges, with tribal colleges eligible for inclusion. The study was also representative of

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BLACKFEET continued from page 19

all undergraduates, regardless of when they graduated from high school.

Data on highest postsecondary education achieved by the students who intended to obtain a credential showed that by 2001, 11 percent had received certificates; 17 percent had received associate degrees; 11 percent had earned bachelor's degrees (including students who did and students who did not first get associate degrees); and 12 percent had enrolled in four-year institutions but had not yet attained a degree.

Blomquist notes that Blackfeet Community College provides a tremendous academic boost to its students who do want to earn a bachelor's degree, since 70 percent of those students succeed in graduating from four-year institutions after starting at the community college.

In contrast, approximately 60 percent of students who leave the reservation directly out of high school to attend college elsewhere never finish their degrees, he says. Being away from their families and running out of money are major factors, but so is arriving ill-prepared to enter a Western educational system.

On the reservation, students receive more personal attention from instructors and attend smaller classes—often fewer than 15 students. This is especially helpful for math and science studies—two main stumbling blocks for students who go straight to a traditional college, he says.

Even students who don't receive bachelor's degrees can find better employment because they've earned a certificate, or they get National Park Service, Tribal Council or Bureau of Indian Affairs jobs, for which associate-degree holders are given preference over candidates who have only high school diplomas.

Some Blackfeet Community College graduates have started their own companies. One graduate in his mid-30s opened a Dollar Store on Main Street in Browning after earning a two-year business degree. "The store is doing very well," Blomquist says. "He does booming business in town."

Another student, also in his mid-30s when he attended the college, started his own computer store in Cut Bank—a town of 3,300 located just east of the reservation—after getting an associate degree with an emphasis in computer technology. "That business, too, is doing very well," Blomquist says. "He had to locate the business off the reservation, though, because home computers are just not common enough yet in Browning."

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Monday afternoon, a scattering of students returns from the exodus prompted by the death in the family. Some students flock to the computer lab to write papers. Half-a-dozen students report to the Blackfeet Studies Room for the Blackfeet Beading and Sewing class. They pick up ongoing beadwork projects—key chains, earrings and braid ties, done in colors and patterns that represent their family heritages and reflect Native patterns. Pyramid shapes, for instance, represent mountains, and a star is two intersecting triangles. A flower motif is three petals with a leaf at the bottom.

One student sews a traditional “ribbon” shirt for her husband. Black and long-sleeved, with yellow ribbons attached in various places, it reflects a time when such shirts were marks of great deeds and symbols of protection. Another woman makes a gusset, a traditional triangle-shaped leather piece covered with beadwork, that a warrior wears to protect his throat from the cold when he’s in ceremonial dress.

The oldest student in the Beading and Sewing class, Flora Running Crane, is a 77-year-old fluent Blackfeet speaker who is already an expert at beading and sewing. She signed up for the class simply to play a “grandmother” role by helping the other students.

Her jet-black hair streaked with silver, her expression kindly, she quietly coaches the others. She has applied to the State Office of Public Instruction for Class 7 specialist certification that will allow her to teach the Blackfeet language at reservation schools.

Running Crane says she hopes the college will reach out to all the members of the tribe, as well as students. “I’d like to see more public music performances, more traditional designs inside the building, more murals outside. We need parties where we get a chance to show off the old way of cooking—making bannock, boiling wild potatoes and carrots and onions in a pot over an open fire.”

Lea Whitford, who has taught at Blackfeet Community College for three years, stands in for the regular Beading and Sewing instructor, Marsha Matte, who had to leave because the man who died was her uncle. Whitford instructs gently, her intonations suggestive, supportive.

A 30-something married mother of three, she earned her undergraduate degree in physical education from Northern Montana College in Havre (now Montana State University–Northern), after spending her first two years at Eastern

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Montana College (now Montana State University-Billings) in the state's largest city, whose population is about 90,000.

"I'd never been to a city before," Whitford says. "Talk about culture shock. I'd never even been far off the reservation."

She chose to go directly to a nontribal college because in 1985, Blackfeet Community College didn't have all the courses she wanted to take, she says. While the hardest part of going to an off-reservation college was being away from family, there were other difficulties. Her second day on campus, a group of male students leaned out of a dormitory window and shouted racial epithets at her, adding, "Go home!"

After graduating from Northern Montana College, Whitford returned to the reservation because she wanted to make a difference for the next generation. She taught Native American studies at Browning High School before being hired at the community college. She believes the tribe's biggest challenge is young people's detachment from their culture. "They are just not involved anymore in things such as beading, or Native artwork, or even a simple thing like gathering sweet-grass for smudge [which is burned during ceremonies]. Having grandmas like Flora in class is a great asset. The younger students will turn to them for help, just like it used to happen in families."

Marvin Weatherwax, a Blackfeet language and history instructor who's been with the college for 10 years, feels that revitalizing the Blackfeet culture through the Native language is crucial. He grew up speaking Blackfeet. "I was raised by my grandparents and schooled at home, and didn't speak English until I was 8."

Weatherwax believes his language may have saved his life. Trained as a parachuting airborne ranger in the U.S. Army, he was held in Vietnam as a prisoner-of-war for 3½ years. "I spoke Blackfeet to my captors, no English. I'm convinced they only kept me alive so they could try and crack the code of what I was saying."

Home at last, he enrolled at Gonzaga University, where he played basketball and competed in gymnastics. He transferred to Eastern Washington University after two years and earned bachelor's degrees in biology and chemistry. He could have pursued any number of jobs, but he returned to the reservation to work in social services, including language programs, and serve on the Tribal Council



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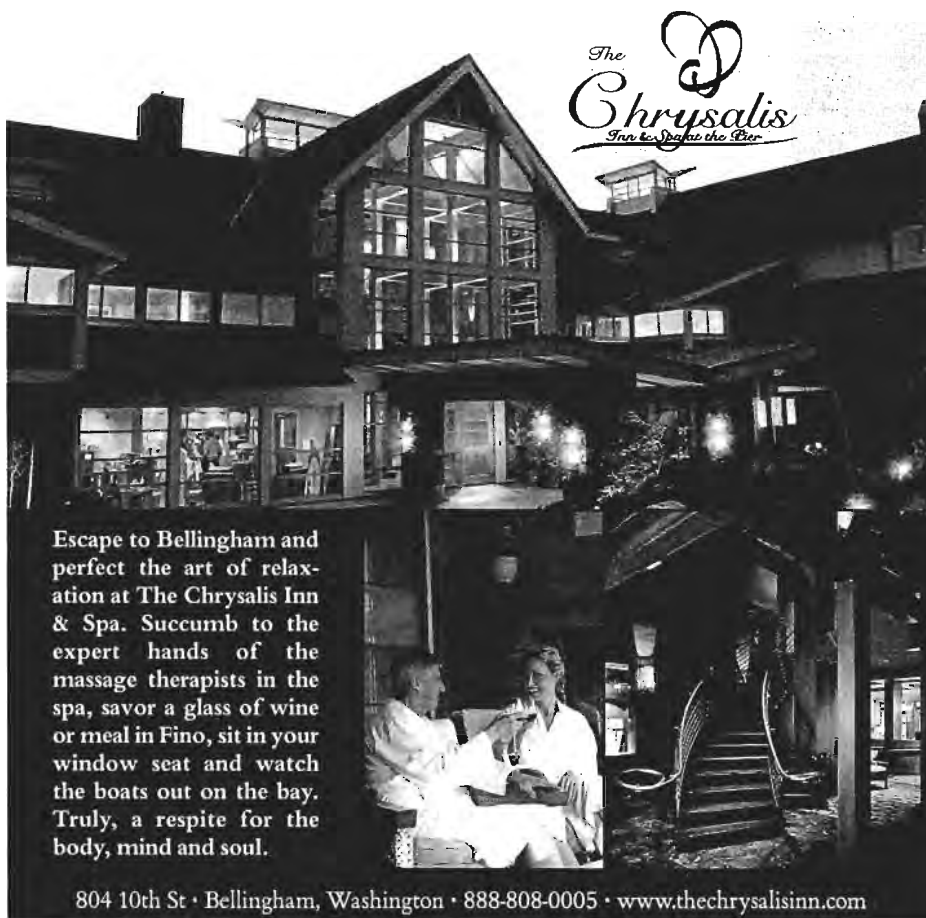
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before he joined the community college. Weatherwax wears cowboy boots and a Western-style shirt tucked into jeans behind a big buckle, and carries himself with the agility of the athlete he once was. His style is passionate and energetic as he strives to convey the value of the Blackfeet language to his students. He dreams that "someday we may all speak Blackfeet again."

One hurdle the students have to overcome is pronunciation difficulties, he says. "I changed methods over the years. I used to teach words and their meanings. But since Blackfeet was always an oral tradition, I switched to teaching a sound system, a string of spoken syllables." For example, after listening to his tapes, students learn to say: *Il ksi pak ksik kho moh tso ko mon ii ksist tso ta ksis ka na ton ni*, which translates as: "The road is very muddy. It just finished raining this morning."

The students' enthusiasm, when they start to get it, gives Weatherwax hope that his dream may one day come true. "They realize, 'Hey, I can say that.' It gives them a chance to feel proud of themselves. They can say, 'This is my language.' I hear them using it with each other. Many will go home and use it. It's a start toward rekindling their pride in their culture."

Respect for tribal mores reinforces the legitimacy of that culture, says Whitright. A school that understands when students leave for an afternoon because of a death in the extended family is a school that sends the message, "Your values—values handed down through generations of tribal members—are praiseworthy," he says.

Tribal colleges have a challenging mission as they work to attract more students, promote economic development and prepare graduates who can contribute to the community in critical areas such as public health services, says Gipp, from the American Indian Higher Education Consortium.

But one thing the colleges have done especially well is to offer Native Americans something they haven't seen since the disappearance of the buffalo: control over how their young adults are educated, and the opportunity to provide education that incorporates Native culture, he says. "Tribal colleges are taking us into a new era of self-determination." ■

Scott Driscoll is a Seattle writer.

For more information on tribal colleges, visit www.aihec.org.

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