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Native Impact Prologue

Hank Lehrer

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Native Impact Prologue

As I was looked over this website's various documents, photos, presentations, and other descriptive materials that I acquired over a decade's worth of work with the communities on three different Nebraska Native American reservations, I quickly realized that telling the story of how this all began in 1996 was also of great importance. While the materials posted give the reader an overview of the most critical facets of the project, missing is the background narrative relative to the motivations and justifications which made up the underpinnings for the endeavor. Here is how it all began.

I have always been a teacher. My training is in education with a bachelor's degree in instrumental music followed by a graduate degree in secondary school administration. After 17 years of high school teaching in Ohio, I had a unique opportunity to join a large state university as a faculty member in charge of developing an undergraduate aviation program. What was to follow over the next 15 years were a Ph.D. in higher education administration, tenure at two universities, a great deal of curriculum development and graduate teaching, and promotion to the rank of professor. But everything changed at the end of my 32nd year of continuous teaching and administration in 1996 when I accepted a tenured professor appointment at the University of Nebraska-Omaha's (UNO) Aviation Institute.

The teaching assignment at UNO was a mix of both upper-level undergraduate and graduate aviation courses. In addition, the expectation was for me to keep writing and publishing as I had been doing before and to carry on my research activities which had been previously funded by outside agencies and associations as well as seek new areas of investigation. There was a keen interest at the Aviation Institute to be responsive to a US government programs which sought to better prepare American Indian elementary and secondary school students in mathematics and science. The catalyst for this initiative was President William Clinton's October 1994 Executive Order 12875 (later annulled and replace by Executive Orders 13084 and 13175 in 1998 and 2000 respectively).

Nebraska has a significant population of Native American families located on three reservations in the in the Northeast quadrant of the state and in many urban areas. With UNO being a state university with an outreach mission toward indigenous peoples and the fact that grant funding for unique programs that improve the academic curriculum was available, a symbiotic relationship was soon developed. It was fortuitus that I was positioned to lead such an initiative since school curriculum development was the cognate on my doctoral study and earlier I had almost two decades of experience in elementary and secondary curriculum development. Everything seemed to be a win-win. All that needed to be done now way to develop a plan to get underway.

Things began rather swiftly after several discussions with not only UNO faculty and staff members but also at regional meetings with numerous Native American

Native Impact Prologue

educational leaders and members of the western region of the NASA Space Grant Program. The general concern shared by these constituencies was that universities were well placed to provide various forms of assistance to tribal colleges and schools. Included in such initiatives were projects and programs to strive, explore, expand, and develop academic programs in mathematics and the sciences and to assist these institutions in finding new funding opportunities focused specifically on using aeronautics as a vehicle.

In Omaha, the Metropolitan Community College (MCC) program for Community and Government Relations, under the direction of Joel Severinghaus, was a member of the NASA Nebraska Space Grant Consortium. Under his guidance, MCC had already launched an outreach program with the state's Native American communities. More importantly, Severinghaus had a working relationship with Little Priest Tribal College (LPTC) in Winnebago and graciously provided me with contact information and an entrée' to the school's leadership.

On January 29, 1997, I made my first trip to the Winnebago Indian Reservation for a meeting that I believe was the cornerstone what would ultimately become the Native Impact program. I met with Dr. Yvonne Bushyhead (Cherokee), president of LPTC and Dr. Virgil Likness, superintendent of the Winnebago Public Schools. Agenda items for that event included extensive discussions about tribal college and reservation educational problems, the need for elementary school teacher workshops, the possible UNO/LPTC interface, and scholarships and shared research interests. Immediate plans were formulated for UNO to host a two-day event in Omaha for the state's tribal college and school administrators with university faculty and staff who were interested in future collaborations.

Within just a matter of days, an invitation was sent to the administrators of the four reservation school districts (Omaha Nation at Macy, Walthill, Winnebago, and Santee) and the two tribal colleges Little Priest Tribal College (Winnebago) and Nebraska Indian Community College NICC (Omaha Nation) for a February 25-26, 1997 meeting at the Thompson Alumni Center on the campus of UNO. In attendance were Dr. Virgil Likness, Dr. Yvonne Bushyhead, Shuler Houser (NICC), Chuck Squier (Santee) and UNO faculty/staff members Drs. Hank Lehrer and Brent Bowen, Dean JoAnne Lofton, Michaela Schaaf, and Don Dendinger. Formed at this meeting was the Nebraska Native American Working Group (NNAWG), the first such educational partnership in the state.

Quickly moving forward, the NNAWG in partnership with the NASA Nebraska Space Grant office at UNO launched the many activities and projects reported on in this website. What resulted in the next 10 years of articulation and collaboration was far beyond anything I had ever envisioned or hoped for; it was one of the high points of my academic career.