



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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On Cherokee Land

In its role as a regional university, Western strives to serve the communities of the region. One such is Cherokee. Significantly, our campus was built on important Cherokee land, a place with religious significance that had been occupied for thousands of years before we came. The most visible vestige of the importance of Cullowhee to the Cherokees was a mound on campus leveled by road graders in 1956 to make way for athletic fields.

Over the past few decades, WCU has developed a strong, though low-key, personal connection to the Cherokee tribe, and we are now positioned for strengthening future connections. For example, due to the vision of a handful of faculty, Western has an MA track in Cherokee Studies in the History Department, along with an interdisciplinary minor in Cherokee Studies in the Anthropology Department, superb archival resources, and an outdoor Cherokee "garden" library of traditional medicinal plants. Most impressively, Western has had for nearly twenty years a physical presence on the Boundary, the WCU Cherokee Center, located in Cherokee on tribal land and built with volunteer labor. Today it is thriving under the leadership of Roseanna Belt (see <http://cess.wcu.edu/conted/cherokee/index.html>).

From the Cherokee perspective, the last ten years have seen significant changes, but the Cherokee community is seeking even more active engagement with the University. This movement, in part fueled by income from the casino, led several years ago to the creation of the Sequoyah Professorship—funded with major contributions from the tribal community, NEH, and others. However, WCU still competes for students, programs, and resources with the University of Tennessee, other UNC schools, and even Ivy League schools, which offer special incentives (such as state grants of resident-tuition) for Eastern Band students. UNC-Chapel Hill has just followed Western's lead, a decade later, and created a new BA minor in Native American Studies; the first student to enroll is from Cherokee. But Western's Cherokee language courses remain the only such university program east of the Mississippi. Western's interdisciplinary Cherokee Studies program, directed by Dr. Jane Eastman, involves over 14 faculty, including three teachers from Cherokee. (See more at www.wcu.edu/cherokeestudies)

Western has a tremendous opportunity for developing relationships in Cherokee. The current Principal Chief, Michell Hicks, is a Western graduate, as are many other tribal officials. Nearly a hundred Eastern Band students are enrolled at Western, and close to another hundred students--Lumbee, Navajo, and other tribes--are enrolled as well. Students' majors are scattered across the departments and colleges, with no one predominating.

The first step we must take is to sign a guidance document, akin to a memorandum of understanding, between the tribe and the university. With this we will affirm the special relationship between the tribe and Western and the mandate for creating new programs. There is potential for more than a new professorship, scholarship, or academic programs, though each is important. Academic programs like Western's Cherokee Studies program will thrive only if there

is an across-the-board university commitment. All aspects of the university are involved: faculty, the Board of Trustees, alumni affairs, admissions, financial aid, counseling, student life, outreach, contracting, and even physical plant in the stewardship of campus cultural heritage sites. "Building bridges between universities and tribal communities is difficult," as Dr. Margaret Raymond of the Cherokee Nation emphasized in her charge to our planning group.

One particular challenge is an undeniable clash of values—those of a traditional culture and ways of knowing with disciplines born out of the western tradition. Indian people have always walked this tightrope. As Roger Buffalohead has suggested, "Too often American Indians, like Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, have relied on the kindness of strangers to write their history. In the literature piling up in our libraries, the missing ingredient is often an American Indian perspective. Indian history through Indian eyes is still the exception, rather than the rule, and no one should be surprised that a similar circumstance prevails in higher education as a whole. By and large, scholarly studies of Indian performance in higher education has been done by outsiders, reflecting an institutional point of view that only rarely takes into consideration the perspective of the Indian community on higher education. One might say that the institutional viewpoint often dwells on Indian student failure—such as the lack of adequate preparation, self-esteem issues, or cultural conflict—as the crux of the problem. On the other hand, Indian community members emphasize institutional barriers as the most critical factors influencing Indian student performance in higher education, and there may be truth in both points of view. However, we must realize that cooperation between the higher education institution and tribal government is the most logical first step in bringing parity to Native American students. Wiping away the tears of the past takes courage, strength, and willingness to reconcile our different paths to the present. The first American Indian to graduate from Harvard University was killed on his way home by other Indians who mistook him for a white man. By working together to make higher education parity a reality for American Indians, we are doing what is right and long overdue."

Real commitment is hard won. We have it today. And through their own quiet triumph of will, the Cherokee people remain in the place where they and their ancestors have been for many thousands of years. Western, as a newcomer, can play a vital role in meeting the needs of the Cherokee community. Gretchen Bataille, the Vice President for Academic Affairs at UNC, reminds us of Cherokee wisdom:

"There is a proverb that says when planning one year ahead, plant grain. When planning ten years ahead, plant trees. But when you are planning fifty years ahead, you must educate the people."

To learn more, stop by The Cherokee Center, Acquoni Road, in Cherokee, 828-497-7920, or stop by the Cherokee Studies Office at 105 McKee Building, 227-2306. The October meeting report and the full text of remarks by Dr. Raymond and Dr. Bataille are on our website. A new brochure on the prehistory of our campus landscape is also available at 105 McKee.

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