

ABORIGINAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Past Lessons - Future Challenges

**Toward a New Definition &
Purpose**

DEDICATION

- ❖ **This presentation is dedicated to the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visionaries and Thinkers with whom I have been privileged to share the past 35 years with as we have struggled to identify and create a learning environment that is both culturally affirming and intellectually enriching for our people.**
- ❖ **Acknowledgments**

BACKGROUND

- ❖ This presentation will examine some of the key issues and challenges that have shaped and influenced higher education for Aboriginal peoples during the past 40 years.
- ❖ Insights and perceptions will be offered relating to the factors that continue to impede the realisation of genuine partnerships, the celebration of Aboriginality, the pursuit of academic excellence and the exercise of the principle of self determination.
- ❖ An comparative overview of international Indigenous higher education will be provided and;
- ❖ Key structural, systemic and operational principles and values will be identified to suggest pathways to the future.

SALIENT ISSUES

- ❖ The Enclaves Movement - Access and Accommodation
- ❖ Teacher Education - 1000 Teachers by 1990
- ❖ Transformative Measures - Mediating Structures
- ❖ International Indigenous Higher Education Models
- ❖ Australian Models of Indigenous Higher Education
- ❖ Toward a New Model of Australian Indigenous Higher Education

- ❖ A Conversation of Hope

The Enclave Movement – Access & Accommodation

- ❖ Prior to the 1970s very few Indigenous people had managed to enroll in higher education. In NSW there were of course individuals such as Bill Jonas, Charles Perkins and Margaret Valadian who managed to break through the higher education barriers but for most Aboriginal people engaging with the Australian higher education system was out of reach.
- ❖ Of course there were programs operating in TAFE systems and they can be viewed as earlier models of the “enclaves” that emerged later in higher education.

The Enclave Movement – Access & Accommodation

❖ The 1970s was a hive of activity in Indigenous education generally with the establishment of state and territory AECCs and the NAEC. The emergence of Aboriginal education thinkers such as Colin Bourke, Eleanor Koumalatsos (Bourke), Bruce McGuinness, (Vic), Errol West (Tas) May O'Brien (WA), Eddie Mabo (TSI), Eric Wilmott, John Budby (QLD) Paul Hughes (SA) and John Lester (NSW), to name but a few heralded a greater level of growth and development in Aboriginal education generally and Aboriginal higher education in particular.



NAEC meeting, June 1983.
From left to right (seated): Ethel Munn, Eric Law, Sepi Woodsup, Paul Hughes, Errol West, Stephen Albert, Davina Tyrrell.
From left to right (standing): Mary Atkinson, Robert Morgan, Helena Gulash, Peter Buckskin, Charles Dixon, Dolamain Ubo, Wendy Clinch, Oriel Green, Wendy Ludwig.

The Enclave Movement – Access & Accommodation

- ❖ Doors to Australia's higher education sector began to open wider to Aboriginal students in the late 1970s and early 1980s, principally as a response to the NAEC's call for the training of 1000 teachers by 1990. (NITE-Auchmuty Report – 72 Aboriginal teachers)
- ❖ “Enclaves” began to emerge and were operating as support services mainly for students enrolled in teacher education and the humanities.
- ❖ After the HE amalgamations mergers of the 1980s, Universities assumed responsibility for TE resulting in a new dimension of possibilities for Indigenous student engagement. Other disciplines including law, medicine were beginning to open up.

Transformative Measures – Mediating Structures

- ❖ Whilst the doors to Eurocentric higher education and thought have largely been forged open creating greater access opportunities than ever, most institutions still seek to engage with Indigenous people as “Guests” rather than partners in the academic domain. (Beyond the Guest Paradigm” – Morgan 1998)
- ❖ Dr. Ray Barnhardt, (Alaska University, Fairbanks) in his paper titled; “Higher Education In The Fourth World: Indigenous People Take Control” (1991) examined various global models of Indigenous higher education and established that there are at least three main categories: Independent Institutions, Affiliated Initiatives, and Integrated Structures. Most of the programs and initiatives in Australian Aboriginal higher education would fall within the model of “integrated structures”.

International Indigenous Models of Higher Education

Independent

- ❖ Models of independent Indigenous higher education include: The Tribal Colleges of the US, The Wananga movement in NZ, The First Nations University in Canada (formally the SIFC that operated as an "affiliated initiative" with the University of Regina), and the Saami people's University and others operating in other Indigenous contexts.
- ❖ The only model that remotely resembles an independent model in Australia is Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the NT.
- ❖ Tranby College, operating in NSW is viewed and funded as a vocational education facility.

International Indigenous Voices

- ❖ Addressing the Maori education and cultural revolution that occurred in NZ during the 1980s, Professor Graham Smith points to the fact that:

"The 'real' revolution of the 1980's was a shift in mindset of large numbers of Maori people - a shift away from waiting for things to be done to them, to doing things for themselves; a shift away from an emphasis on reactive politics to and an emphasis on being more proactive; a shift from negative motivation to positive motivation. These shifts can be described as a move away from talking simplistically about 'de-colonization' (which puts the colonizer at the center of attention) to talking about 'conscientization' or 'consciousness-raising' (which puts Maori at the center). These ways of thinking illustrate a reawakening of the Maori imagination that had been stifled and diminished by colonization processes."

Independent Models of Indigenous Higher Education

Writing about the significance of US Tribal Colleges movement in 1989, Ernest Boyer wrote:

“Tribally controlled colleges can be understood only in the historical context of Indian education and in the spiritual role they play in bringing renewal to their people. When viewed from these perspectives, tribal colleges assume a mission of great consequence to Native Americans and to the nation.if we have learned anything from our relationship with the American Indian, it is that people cannot be torn from their cultural roots without harm. To the extent that we fail to assist Native Americans, through their own institutions, to reclaim their past and secure their future, we are compounding the costly errors of the past “ (Boyer, 1989).

Indigenous Models of Higher Education

Affiliated Initiative:

Models of affiliated models of Indigenous HE include initiatives such as Gabriel Dumont Institute in Canada (Metis focus) and writing of these models Barnhardt states:

“The benefits of institutional affiliations/federations/associations can be seen to be of mutual benefit to both parties in the arrangement.

In those instances where limited resources and/or the economy-of-scale is such that an independent institution is not possible, affiliated arrangements with existing post-secondary institutions offer Indigenous communities an option whereby they can gain access to existing institutional resources and exercise at least a modicum of control over the higher education programs and services they receive. That which is given up in the way of autonomy and independence is offset by the increase in credibility, access and influence over the disposition of existing resources.”

These models usually have a MoU or similar binary negotiated arrangement that defines the relationship and respective obligations.

Indigenous Models of Higher Education

Integrated Structures

This model best describes the current relationship between Aboriginal people and Australian Universities.

Most Aboriginal models are aligned academically and administratively to faculties or schools within mainstream Universities. Staff are employed by the Universities and only a handful of the structures include community based committees or boards even though this is a clear requirement of the Federal government funding arrangements.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SUCCESS

- ❑ Politics of distraction - the colonizing process of being kept busy by the colonizer, of always being on the 'back-foot', 'responding', 'engaging', 'accounting', 'following' and 'explaining'. (The 80-20 Struggle)
- ❑ The reluctance and opposition to the need for change. (A Form of Collective Cognitive Dissonance) This occurs when people are called upon to learn something which contradicts what they already think they know – particularly if they are committed to that prior knowledge – they are likely to resist the new learning; assimilation is easier than the accommodation of difference.
- ❑ Racism
- ❑ War Zones
- ❑ A Surrender to Injustice & Cultural Contamination

The Powers of Seduction and Coercion

One of the defining features of the "Guest Paradigm" is the process of seduction and coercion that "empowers" Aboriginal people to act as institutional gate keepers thus creating an illusion of Aboriginal self determination. Seduction and coercion is much easier to accomplish the more disconnected one is from country, culture and community.

Speaking of this phenomenon Chomsky states:

"It's extremely easy to be sucked into the dominant culture, it can be very appealing. There are a lot of rewards. And what's more, the people you meet don't look like bad people - you don't want to sit there and insult them, maybe they're perfectly nice people. So you try to be friends, maybe you even are friends. Well, you begin to conform, you begin to adapt, you begin to smooth off the harsher edges - and pretty soon its just happened, it kind of seeps in".

(Chomsky, 2003)

Toward a New Model of Australian Indigenous Higher Education

- ❑ In recent years the concept of "Indigenizing the Academy" has emerged to argue the case for Aboriginal people and places within mainstream academies. The focus on the "Academy" is fundamentally flawed; to me the struggle for an Aboriginal learning space is surely about the pursuit of intellectual enrichment without the loss of identity, culture and traditional knowledge systems.
- ❑ Mediating academic structural and systemic seduction is a constant struggle that ultimately serves only the interest of mainstream knowledge and cultural systems.

Other Indigenous Voices

Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, is a Canadian First Nations person who works as an academic with Victoria University in BC, Canada and when speaking about the tortured struggle of Aboriginal academics working in non-Aboriginal spaces Alfred shares:

“And for those of us who work in academia, accepting one’s indigeneity means a constant fight to remain connected to our communities, to live our culture and to defend our homelands, all the while fulfilling our professional duties inside what is, essentially, a central institution of colonial dominion. It’s a complicated and contentious existence, if it is done properly. ”

Other Voices

US President Barack Obama, in a recent speech to the Tribal Nations Conference (Nov 5, 2009) observed that Indian students who attend and study at tribal colleges :

“ ... are eight times less likely to drop out of higher education, they continue on to a four-year institution at a higher rate than students in community colleges, and nearly 80 percent end up in careers that help their tribal nation.”

Toward a Redefinition of Indigenous Higher education

What is currently referred to as Aboriginal higher education in the Australian context is essentially a model of assimilation and accommodation. Most current models privileges dominant cultures and knowledge systems and Aboriginal culture and knowledge is valued and measured only in terms of how well it can be fused onto mainstream systems.

A new model of Aboriginal higher education is required; one that reflects and celebrates Aboriginal cultures, philosophies and knowledge. One which privileges, promotes and celebrates Aboriginal culture and knowledge systems. Is the notion of an Aboriginal University beyond us?

Toward a Redefinition of Indigenous Higher education

Critical to the creation of a new model of Aboriginal higher education is how well it is aligned with and responsive to community.

Speaking of this critical issue Oliver Brass, one of the first Presidents of the SIFC in Canada stressed:

“Our first responsibility is to Indian people, and then we go on from there and try to mesh that together with academic requirements, federation with the University of Regina, etc.. Our first mandate, however, comes from the people. I think that is the thing that is very unique about SIFC.”

Professor Graham Smith in addressing Maori education (schooling) argues a similar position: “This vision provides the guidelines for excellence in Maori, that is, what a good Maori education should entail. It also acknowledges Pakeha culture and skills required by Maori children to participate fully and at every level in modern New Zealand society. Te Aho Matua builds on the Kaupapa of Te Kohanga Reo, and provides the parameters for the uniqueness that is Kura Kaupapa Maori. Its power is in its ability to articulate and connect with Maori aspirations, politically, socially, economically and culturally. A powerful vision is able to provide impetus and direction to struggle”

Culturally Grounded Leadership

Australian Aboriginal higher education is pivotal to growing and nurturing culturally grounded leadership. Critical thinking and informed judgments that reflect our cultural identity and knowledge systems must become a feature of any system of learning and development. The conduct of emancipatory and other forms of research is also essential to maintain and celebrate our cultural identity, rather than a process of simply engaging Aboriginal students in research based studies that may or may not have relevancy to the continuing struggle for Aboriginal rights and freedoms.

Beyond Integrated Structures

Australian Indigenous higher education models, operating mostly as “integrated structures”, are not positioned to provide for the level of community involvement and self determination enjoyed by most other international Indigenous higher education models. Given that “integrated structures” are aligned with and accountable to non-Aboriginal academic faculties/departments/schools/ they are clearly unable, even with the best of intentions, to provide the type of infrastructure that is required to develop a truly independent Aboriginal space of learning let alone programs for cultural affirmation.

Aboriginal Culture or Aboriginal Heritage

A disturbing development in Aboriginal HE is the emergence of a growing number of Aboriginal academics in leadership positions who have or claim Aboriginal heritage links but it would appear that many of them have little understanding of their ancestral community or country, their culture, their traditions and how this informs their identity; land/country is integral to our identity as Aboriginal people!!!

An attendant issue is the growing voice of "young Aboriginal leaders" who are calling for the older warriors to step aside and allow the young people through. This is a regrettable development and perhaps is more about being an Aboriginal politician rather than an Aboriginal leader; it certainly isn't a feature of any Aboriginal cultural or knowledge system that I am aware of.

In recent weeks I've been watching an online discussion about the state of Aboriginal affairs and the perceived mess that it and our Country is in and I was struck by the following observation offered by John Hartley:

Aboriginal Culture or Aboriginal Heritage

John observes that:

"Divide and conquer has always been and remains one of the most effective tools in the colonizer's tool box, for better or for worse, the fact is, as a People we are in a state of forced transition, a state reflected also in the health of our Country, a state brought about as I see it, by the traumatic genocidal colonizing process. It is in this traumatic transitional fog we are currently being forced to find our way through and,

- Some of us will re-awaken to our cultural roots, values and practices
- Some of us will drift aimlessly
- Some of us will walk with a foot in two worlds
- Some of us will remain living with a strong cultural, ceremonial and spiritual foundation
- Some of us will think, do and act and choose to wear the colonizers clothes"

Prerequisites for Change

This then leads to some concluding remarks.

Aboriginal higher education must move beyond the limitations of “integrated structures”, which currently defines most Aboriginal higher education models and their relationship with their host institution.

Real and sustainable transformation will occur only when a new model is conceived, designed and developed by US, one that reflects and celebrates Aboriginal cultures, philosophies and knowledge systems and one that is intrinsically connected to community and the people from which we are drawn.

Conclusion

In order to achieve our objectives three important questions need to be answered:

- ☐ Is there a need to establish an independent community based and controlled National Aboriginal Education Association to advocate Aboriginal education development?
- ☐ Are we up to the challenge of establishing an Aboriginal University or Place of Higher Learning? And how should we go about doing this?
- ☐ How will those Aboriginal people who follow judge us if we fail to act with purpose and conviction?