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## **THE OKSALE STORY: TRAINING TEACHERS FOR SCHOOLS SERVING AMERICAN INDIANS AND ALASKA NATIVES**

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### **Introduction**

This article is one in a series of manuscripts being developed to tell the story of programs to prepare teachers for schools serving American Indian and Alaska Native youths. The series begins by featuring a particular teacher-training program based on a partnership between a tribal college, Northwest Indian College (NWIC) and a public research university, Washington State University (WSU). A brief overview provides the reader with a sense of how the partnership developed and describes various components of the teacher training program. The focus then turns to students' views about the institution they attended and the teacher preparation program in which they were enrolled. In the conclusion section, we discuss the overall condition of teacher preparation and offer a transition to forthcoming manuscripts.

### **Overview**

The Native teacher preparation program featured in this article is named Oksale (a traditional Lummi Native word that essentially means *teacher*). Oksale, developed in

partnership with Washington State University and Northwest Indian College, was born out of the necessity to certify and license Native teachers in Washington. Both WSU and NWIC are land grant institutions with comparable missions and service population areas. In this particular case, there are overlapping institutional missions, with the similar goal of training teachers. With the main campus located on the Lummi Reservation and courses offered on reservations throughout the Northwest, NWIC is uniquely positioned and designed to attract and retain a critical mass of American Indian and Alaska Native students. NWIC offers the first two years of instruction leading to an Associate of Arts transfer degree in education while serving as a delivery site for the final two years of instruction leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree. The final two years of the teacher preparation program are overseen by WSU during the students' formal acceptance in an accredited teacher certification program.<sup>1</sup>

The mission of Oksale is to prepare qualified indigenous teachers to meet the educational needs of indigenous students, families, and communities through a culturally responsive curriculum. The underlying beliefs evident to all students are:

- We believe indigenous people can be qualified teachers while maintaining their cultural identity through a culturally responsive curriculum to serve the educational needs of indigenous children and families.
- We believe that indigenous concepts and methods will enhance culturally responsive education for all.
- We believe we can educate students' bodies, minds, and spirits. (Oksale Curriculum Development Committee, 2000).

Oksale was created to offer a Native teacher preparation program that fulfills all teacher certification requirements for the State of Washington. Oksale students receive a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education from WSU upon fulfilling the stringent

requirements of WSU's Department of Teaching and Learning, one of the premier teacher education programs in the Northwest.

As shown in Table 1, all students complete a challenging professional course of required study while either meeting or exceeding WSU's standards in order to graduate.

Table 1. List of K-8 Required Education Courses

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<u>Section</u>	<u>Course Title</u>
T&L 300	An Introduction to Field Experience
T&L 301	Constructing a Psychology of Teaching & Learning
T&L 305	Fundamentals of Instruction
T&L 306	Survey of Elementary Reading and Language Arts
T&L 307	Survey of Children's Literature
T&L 320	Elementary Reading Methods
T&L 402	Instructional Practicum I
T&L 352	Teaching Elementary Math
T&L 371	Teaching Elementary Science
T&L 385	Teaching Elementary Social Studies
T&L 405	Instructional Practicum II
T&L 330	Diversity in Schools
T&L 390	Integrated Fine Arts Into K-8 Curriculum
T&L 483	Integrating Health & Fitness Into K-8 Curriculum

MUS 388	Music for the Classroom Teacher	
T&L 310	Classroom Management	
T&L 413	Introduction to ESL for K-8 Teachers	
T&L 490	Advanced Practicum	
T&L 403	The Social Foundations of Elementary Curriculum	
T&L 445	Methods of Educational Technology	
EdPsy 401	Classroom Assessment, Elementary	
SpEd 420/421		Teaching Inclusive Classrooms
T&L 415	Directed Teaching	

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*Note.* Washington State University, College of Education. (2002). K-8 Requirements and Core Courses [online]. <<http://academics.wsu.edu/fields/study.asp?ID=EDUC#233>>

A primary directive of Oksale is to provide instruction that helps to develop participants' knowledge and competencies to successfully teach in elementary school. In addition, the instruction must develop participants' knowledge and competencies to help American Indian elementary school students meet Washington State's Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs).<sup>2</sup> To achieve these directives, all Oksale students complete the coursework listed in Table 1, as well as demonstrate the ability to:

- Integrate Washington State’s essential academic learning requirements into lesson plans and units.
- Use assessment and data collection to inform curricular progress and to demonstrate having a positive impact on all students’ learning.
- Develop and implement culturally responsive educational service delivery (i.e., assessments, curriculum, methods, etc.).
- Use knowledge about the history of American Indian education, current progress and challenges in Indian education, and future directions of Indian education to meet the diverse needs of Indian peoples who live on reservations and in major urban areas across the U.S.
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Students link their coursework to the real work of classroom instruction through 108 hours of practicum. While completing their practicum, students teach lessons across the curricular areas as well as develop units that they implement and evaluate. A major component of the practicum requirement is to demonstrate reflective-constructivist teaching competencies. That is, students must be able to (a) demonstrate that they have had a positive impact on their students’ learning, (b) conduct self-evaluations regarding their own effectiveness, and (c) identify and use “best practices” in education. Experiential learning is a critical component of the Oksale program and is being supported by partnerships with the local tribal and public schools as well as with distant schools and communities where NWIC’s place-bound students live, work, and attend classes.

All students are provided with a wide net of support services to ensure that they fulfill, in a timely manner, all program requirements necessary to stay on course for graduation. The formal support system includes (a) scheduled advising sessions twice a month with each student to address any academic, financial, and/or personal issues; (b) faculty-student conferences to provide meaningful feedback to students about their

progress in class; and (c) scheduled meetings between the WSU faculty liaison and individual students to monitor the status of the students' files. Each student's status is monitored by at least two staff members to make sure all students are completing all program requirements. There is a regular procedure to inform students about the status of their files and to provide them with proper direction required to stay in good academic standing. Academically, students have been doing quite well in their program, with a grade point range between 2.82 to 3.96; the overall GPA is 3.50.

The first cohort of six students graduated in May 2000 with Bachelor of Arts degrees and certification in elementary education. Five of the six graduates received teaching jobs, four at tribal schools and one with a tribal Head Start program. The sixth graduate is in graduate school near his home reserve in Canada. All five graduates who secured teaching positions, having finished their second year of teaching in May 2002, plan to stay in the field of teaching. Five students graduated in May 2002, and of the five graduates, three graduated with honors from WSU. The Oksale program personnel anticipate that 15 more students will graduate in December 2002; all 15 students were to complete their coursework during the 2002 summer semester and have made arrangements for student teaching the following fall semester.

### **The Students' Voices**

Students were interviewed to obtain their input about three areas of discourse. We sought the students' impressions about (a) unique elements of the institution and (b) how their involvement in the Oksale program enhanced their college experience, personal growth, and cultural knowledge. It was important for us to learn what the

students thought about the institution and program, in order to get a sense of their experiences and perceptions of those experiences. Our intention was to explore the various meanings regarding personal action of the students that was inspired by the teacher-training program. In the following pages, we share the insights garnered from the students<sup>3</sup> and offer interpretations we arrived at when reviewing the audio taped and transcribed interviews.

### Students' Views of the Institution

When asked about the unique elements of the teacher training program at NWIC, students gave us the impression that important qualities included available resources, support, and location; an opportunity to make schooling a better experience than what the students themselves had encountered as youths; and an opportunity to enjoy the feeling of extended family among students and personnel. Moreover, as in the following quotation, the reader can get the sense that students were clearly the priority of the program and that great care was given to meeting a wide variety of needs:

All the resources that we received for each class as well as the host of resources that support staff would give us while teaching and doing research projects, and the other thing is the support we received whether it was counseling or troubleshooting or conflict resolution. We were able to work at a tribal school and connecting with the teachers over there and working with students that come from different types of backgrounds whether it is high risk, poverty, or there are a host of social problems out there. So it is a unique experience. Being able to know the issues in American Indian education and the multicultural education component because we are becoming aware of the vastly growing diversity outside our doors was a plus. The special education component of learning more in Indian country that there are a lot of students that have special needs was a plus in terms of having the opportunity to gain that knowledge and understanding. (personal communication, February 13, 2002)

For a Native student to succeed in a teacher-training program, gaining access to available resources is greatly enhanced by people knowing what the student needs. Sometimes this means making available the resources and support necessary to deal with issues outside the classroom. Establishing a personal connection is important when helping students deal with “a host of social problems” that conspire to undermine the education of our Native youths. Coupled with the desire to develop personal connections with students, most of the Oksale Native staff and faculty share similar life experiences with the Native students and can anticipate the potential trouble spots and conflicts that many students encounter in life and that we continue to see occurring in public schools today.

When we were listening to the students, it became obvious that Oksale enabled the students to address long-standing issues that they had encountered while attending public K-12 schools. For the most part, public school was not a positive experience, and Native students thought that Oksale allowed them an opportunity to do what was effective in educating Native youths.

I liked the special education component of Oksale. That has always been a high interest in my having worked in the tribal school as a parent liaison and bringing children into school and encouraging them for attendance because a lot of our children get labeled inadvertently *special ed* because they are not in school. The teachers, rather the non-Native teachers, that don't understand the perspectives on the reservation or the community, would rather say, “I am going to refer this child to special education.” My main impetus in getting involved in education was to bring about change in that area. I do recognize that we do have some special needs that are valid as far as behavior and genetics [are concerned]. I like the experience of working in tribal school and have done so in different degrees. Being in the classroom was real exciting to put into the working knowledge as far as applying the constructivist learning and inquiry-based instruction and demonstrating to teachers that the children can learn by using the new techniques and



strategies that we learned in our class. As young people in school, we recognize that we had these learning behaviors that were not addressed. But now we can address them for our people, and you can just see the light bulbs turn on and it makes sense. That is exciting to see the constructivism work and talking culturally with the students. We make a good connection there. (personal communication, February 16, 2002)

One of the great insights the preceding quotation illuminates is that effective educational programs for Native youths draw on both the traditional, cultural ways of knowing and the more mainstream, contemporary practices that are grounded in the students' reality (i.e., inquiry-based instruction). The foundation, of course, is for the teacher to understand the perspectives on the reservation or in the community. This is a key aspect of talking culturally with students and making good connections.

The sense of localness that NWIC offered was comforting for Oksale students. It was more than simply being a convenient location. For the Native students, NWIC was a higher education institution on an Indian reservation, and this represented a place they would receive the attention they needed and deserved. One student offered matter-of-factly:

I have had the opportunity to pursue my four-year degree without having to leave home. I know that what I had felt when I decided to continue my education is that I felt really comfortable being able to pursue my goals in my own backyard. I think that that was probably one of the most unique things about the Northwest Indian College and the Oksale program. I was able to be successful without having to step out of my comfort zone. If I had gone to another institution off the reservation, I would have gotten through it fine. I would have been successful there too, but if I had [gone] to a different institution, I don't feel like I would have gotten the one-on-one that I have received at Oksale. (personal communication, February 15, 2002)

This quotation helps to dispel the myth that tribal colleges and universities are not matriculating the types of Native students who would make it at public universities. What we have observed and what academic records reveal is that the caliber of Oksale students is quite high. NWIC is successful at meeting the needs of Native students because it is creating the type of learning community in which students want to succeed.

The learning community that Oksale students prefer is one that is both concerned about and respectful of the family. Oksale is designed to reflect core family values that students have grown up with and that honor their Native community and heritage. As one student expressed:

Part of the reason I went into education was thinking of who[m] I would be working with, and that is the children. I was working as a teacher's aide at a school and felt there was a need for teachers who were better trained to teach Native children. So from that I went and looked for a program that would fit those requirements. In this program, the majority of the faculty are Native teachers, and I enjoy that because I am Native myself. When I came to this program I felt welcome. I felt like part of the family. Even though they were people from all over the United States, they treated me either like their son or brother, and they took me under their wing. (personal communication, February 12, 2002)

Clearly, the community that Native students often grow up in emphasizes the extended family concept in which *we are all related*. Students raised with the worldview of interrelatedness *can* regard each other as brothers and sisters while relating to faculty and administrators as aunts and uncles or grandparents. Oksale can be translated into English to mean a *teacher*, and we have found from listening to the students that to successfully train Native teachers requires being able to develop a family atmosphere within the program. Native teachers in training (and, we believe, all

preservice teachers) need to feel the love, care, and support that come from an extended family. Even though all of the students were adults and living adult lives, one of the unique elements characterizing Oksale was that students got the sense that program staff and instructors were looking out for the students' welfare and were concerned about what they learned in life.

### Personal Impact on the Students

How did their involvement in the program enhance the students' college experience, personal growth, and cultural knowledge? First of all, it is not an understatement to say that, for every student participating in the Oksale Native teacher preparation program, Oksale was their pathway to new learning experiences, to personal and professional growth, and to new knowledge. It was the college experience that they were looking for and that fit their current life journey. It was their opportunity to pursue personal goals that challenged them to grow. Above all, the students felt comfortable because Oksale was using cultural knowledge as the foundation for learning. As one student put it:

Without the program, I probably would have opted out for just my para-educator certificate or license or whatever that entails. I would probably not have stayed in for the full teaching certificate just because it's such a rigorous schedule, and there are so many responsibilities with the program. It would be worse at a larger university; without the support it would be that much more stressful. Here, I feel like the stress is reduced. I know that if I have to miss a class for my family, my classmates and my teachers are going to work with me and help me come back to the spot where I was before and continue to progress. It seems like the other institutions have punitive measures, like, "Oh, you're spiritual and cultural! Hmmm, let's find a way to dock points off for that." Here, it's like everything is very inclusive. All of our life experiences and our cultural experiences count toward our knowledge base and it's acknowledged. That's the most important part. For example, in the multicultural diversity class that we took, we had to do these autobiographies and we got to see where everybody was coming from, with the

different backgrounds and the different levels of education, and to see how each of us at different times was pigeonholed, either through special education or expectations. I don't think we would have gotten that at another college, number one, or we wouldn't have been comfortable to say it in front of all the other people in a different situation. Because we are so close, there's underlying trust that each of us holds. It's really awesome! (personal communication, February 16, 2002)

When we reflect on the words of this student, we get the sense that it has a prolonged negative effect on life goals when students believe that their culture and spirituality will result in points being docked off in their schooling. Oksale made it possible to become a teacher without feeling the pain and frustration of other people finding fault with their Native heritage. Although it sounds simple, it is powerful to report that the Oksale students were able to go to college and feel good about the experience *simply* because the program personnel did not add to the students' daily stress of living.

As we see in the next student quotation, it is apparent that the Oksale students enjoyed not only learning in a community that cultivated multicultural respect and trust, but also learning in a program that let them experience the beauty of their potential:

This college has been the best experience of my adult life besides having my kids. Because everything that I had thought about myself growing up on the reservation, being sent to a public school that didn't treat us the way that we should have been treated as kids. It made me feel that I was dumb. I didn't realize how smart I was until I came to Northwest Indian College, and I didn't fully appreciate everything that I had until I was able to come here. I learned art. I never thought I could do art. I learned skills that I thought I would never learn or struggled with in school, and I was walking around going, "I am not as dumb as I thought." Now I can sit with the teacher in the classroom or sit in the principal's office and not be intimidated. Now I have so much more confidence to be able to sit on the same level with them, speak on the same educational level and not be afraid that they are not going to respect what I have to say. Because the first thing I say when I walk in is, "I am preparing to become a teacher." The first thing I said when I

introduced myself to the new teacher that my son has this year was, "I am one of you." That doesn't scare me. They [the teacher and administrators] have to look at me in a different way. It doesn't matter what they are thinking, it is just they have to realize I am just as capable as they are. And I would never have been able to do that beforehand, before going into Oksale. There is no way that I would have been able to have the confidence to sit across from the principal and carry on a conversation with him without feeling intimidated. And I don't feel that anymore. (personal communication, February 18, 2002)

One of the primary attributes of Oksale is the program personnel's emphasis on helping each student develop self-confidence. It was inspiring to us that, during our interviews with students, often they would sit up in their chairs and take on a more determined tone while saying something like "and not be afraid that they are not going to respect what I have to say" or "now I can sit with the teacher in the classroom or sit in the principal's office and not be intimidated."

The Oksale students thought that people on the reservation looked at them differently as a result of their college experience. The growth and knowledge gained by the students had already resulted in community members' growing respect and recognition that they were teaching professionals who could participate in efforts to improve schooling for Native children. In the words of one student,

Everyone knows that we're in Oksale and that we are going to be teachers, and they encourage us in the community. And we think that is great. I think we have always had the respect of the community as far as being trusted and talked to. So I think this only enhances it more. Now we are going to be entrusted with their children, which is really good, a good feeling. With our peers it was a good experience to see all of the different cultures coming together. We are all Native people, so there are different cultures and personalities like any classroom has, like our classrooms will have when we begin to teach. So that was a good experience. We are getting to use good management tools. As far as the community, I think the community will be ready for us, and that is the good part.

I have already talked to parents and many different administrators and they'd asked, "Well, what should we do for discipline, or how should we do this attendance policy, or what are all these different disciplinary things?" I think, for the most part, we won't have that discipline problem anymore once we get Native people engaged in the classrooms and in the community. I don't feel that we will have that bad of a discipline problem. If we're engaged, we can talk it out. (personal communication, February 20, 2002)

## **Conclusion**

Due to severe under-representation of Native people in the teaching profession,<sup>4</sup> programs like Oksale are valuable because they take on the task of developing, delivering, and assessing Native teacher preparation curricula. Many such programs have been established through individual tribal college/university efforts to partner with existing teacher education programs at four-year colleges and universities and other tribal colleges and universities. Whatever the arrangement might be, the service is based on local control and equal access to education. In the end, state colleges and universities that choose to partner with tribal colleges and universities have unique opportunities to build bridges of understanding and to work collaboratively on educational reform to pave the way for more culturally responsive education at all levels.

The Oksale teacher preparation program has experienced many successes. These successes include the graduation and placement of students in teaching jobs (in which they will continue), the integration of Native language and culture throughout the curriculum, and the development of effective mentoring programs. Yet, the Oksale project has had to address many challenges that are not too different from issues that other Native teacher preparation programs have had to mediate. For example, there

have been concerns about accreditation and certification issues, funding, infusion of Native culture and language when students represent diverse tribal backgrounds, student services, recruitment and retention of Native faculty, and transfer of credits between/across institutions. Other challenges that have proved to strengthen the integrity of the program include scheduling of programs to match community needs, use of technology, and partnerships with mainstream institutions. Although the challenges are many, native and indigenous voices in education are expressing successes, in volume and intensity, by uniting with others to effect systemic change.

It is a complex undertaking to develop Native teacher preparation programs that meet the diverse cultural and educational needs of students while being in alignment with state and national standards. Nevertheless, there are growing numbers of examples of model programs that work and are making a significant impact. Like painting community murals, decisions must be made collaboratively with regard to design, medium, colors, brushes, and size in order to reflect the “spirit” of each community. The lesson learned, through the Oksale program, is that the integration of Native knowledge, ways of knowing and learning, and ways of being are critical to developing a successful program, and in particular to the success of future Native and indigenous teachers who will measure their success by making a positive difference in the lives of Native youth.

The Oksale program, supported by the U.S. Department of Education and W. K. Kellogg Foundation, is realizing the graduation of an increasing number of Native and non-Native educators who are prepared to meet the unique needs of American Indian and Alaska Native youth. In closing, we feel education is a socio-political endeavor that

can provide the means for people to empower themselves. For tribal colleges and universities as well as mainstream public institutions of higher education, this requires working together as agents of change to address the pressing needs of Native children, families, and communities. At Oksale, the seed of prosperity is beginning to take root and soon the mountains, valleys, and fields will be covered with the flowers of our future that will inspire the aspirations of our Native youth for generations to come.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>For more information on Oksale and other academic programs, please go to Northwest Indian College's website located at [www.nwic.edu](http://www.nwic.edu).

<sup>2</sup>For more information regarding Washington State's Essential Academic Learning Requirements, please go to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's web page site at <http://www.k12.wa.us/curriculum/instruct/ealrs.asp>.



<sup>3</sup>The student quotations are excerpts from personal interviews with Oksale students conducted during spring 2002. They are shared anonymously out of respect for other students whose voices are not included due to the space limitation of this article.

<sup>4</sup>See Pavel, D.M., & Curtain, T.R. (1997). *Characteristics of American Indian and Alaska Native education: Results from the 1993-94 and 1990-91 schools and staffing survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

### **Reference**

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