



UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

“INDIAN EDUCATION SERIES: EXAMINING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR
AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS”

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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Chairman Tester, Vice Chairman Barrasso, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon about higher education for American Indian students.

My name is Les Purce, and I am the President of The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Since opening our doors in 1971, Evergreen has established a national reputation for leadership in developing innovative interdisciplinary, collaborative and team-taught academic programs. We have a vibrant undergraduate program, three graduate programs, and public service centers that constitute a unique academic setting. Evergreen, the smallest public, baccalaureate institution in Washington with nearly 4,400 students, values a student-centered learning environment, a link between theory and practice, and a multicultural community of diverse faculty, students and staff working together.

The vibrancy and leadership of Evergreen is clearly illustrated in the College’s unparalleled combination of academic and public service programs, designed in partnership with Northwest tribes, to make a lasting impact on education in Indian Country. Since the 1970s, with the founding of the College, Evergreen has been a leader in the advancement of higher education for American Indian students. The College today embraces its Native student community of 6.1 percent – which is more than twice the proportion of 2.5% Native student across all public four-year colleges in Washington. An astounding 11.9% of all Evergreen graduate students are Native American, compared to only 2.2% of graduate students attending public universities statewide. The college’s faculty is 6.5% Native, as are 4.7% of the College’s non-instructional staff.

Evergreen’s focus on access to higher education for American Indian student goes hand in hand with our commitment to student success. American Indian undergraduate students experience an 81% fall-to-fall retention rate, which is nearly identical to the College’s 82% retention rate for undergraduates overall.

As stated by Bill Frank, Jr. (Nisqually), former member of the Evergreen Board of Trustees, “Evergreen is an institution of education that conveys the lessons of the past to the leaders of tomorrow. Through Native American and World Indigenous Peoples Studies, Evergreen transcends the limits of education to reach out to people of all backgrounds and beliefs.”

Evergreen's Native American Academic and Public Service Programs: Our History and the Present

Our work and commitment to institutionalize the importance of advancing higher education for Native American students in partnership with tribal governments began in the early 1970s when the College was founded. In keeping with Washington State's Centennial Accord, Evergreen works on a government-to-government basis with tribes to jointly develop programs that respond to the needs of tribal people in the Northwest. Together these programs enable the college to continue and expand upon its history of responding, in partnership, to the educational needs of indigenous peoples.

Evergreen's "House of Welcome" Longhouse and Education and Cultural Center was the first building of its kind on a public campus in the United States. Over the last forty years the Longhouse has provided service and hospitality to students, the College, and the surrounding Native communities. The Longhouse has created a home and community base for artists and arts organizations throughout the United States and around the Pacific Rim. Its mission is to promote indigenous arts and cultures through education, cultural preservation, creative expression and economic development through the Native Artists Grants Programs, Native Artist Gatherings, Native Art Sales and Exhibitions, Artist-in-Resident Program, Northwest Heritage Program and International Indigenous Artists Exchange Program. Today the Longhouse manages a database of more than 2,000 indigenous artists, art organizations and arts supporters from four countries: the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The spirit of the Longhouse is recreated on campus each day through dedicated outreach in response to the needs of indigenous peoples attending Evergreen. First Peoples Advising Services provides support to assist students in achieving their academic and personal goals through comprehensive academic, social and personal advising, referrals to campus and community resources and community-building educational events.

Evergreen offers three distinct academic programs. The Master of Public Administration (MPA) in Tribal Governance, which began in 2002, focuses on structures, processes and issues specific to tribal governments, preparing students for a wide range of jobs in tribal, federal, state and local governments and nonprofit organizations. Evergreen's MPA program is the first degree-granting program in this discipline and our program has been modeled by others, such as the University of Minnesota at Duluth.

The Native American and World Indigenous Peoples (NAWIPS) studies, an on-campus undergraduate program, applies indigenous perspectives to Native Studies and examines the effects of European/American social values and structures on Native history and contemporary life. NAWIPS curriculum focuses on the vitality and diversity of Native nations, and respects the value of indigenous knowledge. It examines the global effects of colonialism, the unique treaty relationships between tribal nations and settler governments, political decolonization and cultural revitalization in the contemporary era, and the responsibilities of non-Native neighbors and allies in this process. NAWIPS programs focus on the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the Americas and the world.

The undergraduate Reservation Based Community Determined program is designed for place-bound students who are deeply connected to tribal communities. The program has been "reservation-based" from the beginning with most classes held on Indian reservations in western Washington. By design, the program curriculum is guided by suggestions from tribal leaders, tribal education staff, and other tribal specialists (for example, Indian Child Welfare workers), to ensure that program content addresses significant community issues. Hundreds of students have earned their degrees through this program and gone on to graduate school and various positions in tribal government, social services, education, and other fields.

In addition to these programs, students at Evergreen can work with Native American faculty throughout the undergraduate curriculum (such as in the Expressive Arts), and in graduate programs such as the Master of Environmental Studies (MES) and Master in Teaching (MIT) programs. In all Evergreen programs, Native American students, community members and tribes have a dedicated place in higher education, and easy access to technology and research services.

Evergreen's academic and public service work is enhanced through specific efforts to develop culturally relevant curriculum and teaching resources in the form of case studies on key issues in Indian Country. In partnership with the Northwest Indian College, Salish Kootenai College, and Grays Harbor College, Evergreen initiated in 2006 the Enduring Legacies Native Case Initiative. The goal is to develop and widely disseminate culturally relevant curriculum and teaching. This initiative is supported through the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Science Foundation.

The Future

Our work and leadership in the advancement of higher education for Native American students is not yet done, but an evolving part of the College's identity. As the College continues to deepen our relationship with Native American communities we have named a Special Assistant to the President for Tribal Government Relations to further strengthen the government-to-government relationships between Evergreen and tribes in the United States, with particular emphasis on the Pacific Northwest. In collaboration with The Evergreen State College administration, the Longhouse, the Native Programs at Evergreen, and tribes, this position provides leadership in formulating and strengthening tribal relationships, initiatives and collaborative partnerships at Evergreen through strategic planning and support for Native initiatives and programs at Evergreen.

Evergreen is also building future opportunities through efforts to expand the Longhouse Education and Cultural Center. The College is embarking on Phase II of a \$7 million capital campaign to support new program development and growth through the development of an Indigenous Arts Campus and the launch of a Masters of Fine Arts in Indigenous Art.

The Longhouse is currently in the process of continuing the design and development of a one of a kind indigenous arts campus where the art-making facilities and the surrounding campus are based on indigenous architectural design and cultural concepts. Collaboratively planned with Native artists, art scholars, tribal representatives, elected officials and art service organizations, the facility will allow the Longhouse to continue to serve as the focal point for coordination and administration of the new arts campus.

The Longhouse, with support from the Ford Foundation, has secured \$1 million to build two of the four envisioned art studios on Evergreen's campus. The first, a carving studio in the shape of a replica longhouse, opened in 2012. The second, a fiber arts studio, is expected to open in 2016 and will pay tribute to the long-standing relationships among Salish and Maori peoples.

The Indigenous Arts Campus will provide a series of spaces to foster vibrant culturally interconnected art-making for indigenous peoples along the Pacific Rim. The new facilities will allow Evergreen and the Longhouse to leverage the networks and creative potential of the Longhouse's successful intergenerational programs, connect programmatically with the initiatives of surrounding tribes, and provide the opportunity for artists to work in media not readily available to them at home while being mentored by master artists from around the world. This vision will have far reaching economic and cultural impacts for artists, tribes and numerous rural communities by fostering significant professional development of emerging artists and opening new markets for their work.

Evergreen's Longhouse is also in the early stages of developing the first Masters of Fine Arts in Indigenous Arts in the United States. The program, to be launched for the 2016-17 academic year, would provide an arts education that is grounded in indigenous cultural values, protocols, practices and forms of knowledge. In particular the degree would develop innovative, student-centered approaches to Indigenous Arts practice within a culturally affirming educational setting; affirm the expertise and academic authority of indigenous artists and scholars; and strategically align the Longhouse's public service mission to promote indigenous arts and cultures with the academic mission of the College.

In Summary

The decisions we make today will have implications long into the future. Now is the time as we would say at Evergreen to "Dig Deep" and ensure that there is a national commitment to advancing higher education for American Indian students today and for generations to come, in partnership and collaboration with tribes. We must make an investment to ensure that American Indian students have access to higher education, have the resources necessary to be successful, and that they graduate with the skills and credentials they need to make a difference for their communities and their families.

The stakes are too high not to. We live in an increasingly complex world, and tribal leaders are challenged to respond to the very real impact of climate change and other threats to the environment, threats to tribal sovereignty, and other challenges. At the same time there are unprecedented opportunities through various kinds of economic development, changing technologies and the fastest growing demographic—Native youth. Well educated tribal members can help negotiate the changing terrain on behalf of their communities.

The landscape in higher education is changing quickly and dramatically. The students in higher education and those at the doorstep are more diverse racially, ethnically and financially. If the United States is to be competitive globally well into the twenty-first century we must make sure that no one is left behind and that each student is able to reach behind and pull the next generation through.

As stated by Vi Hilbert (1918-2008), Upper Skagit Elder and Daniel J. Evans Chair Scholar (1995), "When I first walked on that campus (Evergreen), the beautiful thing that I felt there was the Spirit. The Spirit said 'Come. This is a place for people to hear what your ancestors wanted you to pass on.'"

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to speak before your Committee today.