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CONCERNING THE PAST,
PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF
NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES





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The Future of American Indian Studies

Paul Apodaca

American Indian studies celebrates forty years at this conference in conjunction with a campuswide effort to recognize the development of interdisciplinary studies programs in the second half of the twentieth century. Interdisciplinary programs (IDPs) are a major aspect of the progress of academics in the United States.

When this effort began in 1969, the community that surrounds UCLA and is served by it was engaged in one of the largest social movement eras in US history. Millions of Americans and people across the globe had experienced major shifts in economics, politics, and culture. Earlier in the century, the man-made disaster of the dust bowl in the United States and the stock market crash of 1929 threatened the economic and intellectual development that had transformed society from the inception of the Industrial Revolution. World War II brought challenges to the ideas of government, economy, human rights, and technology. The purpose of education in the United States became an important consideration as the California State University and University of California systems addressed new populations and developments in science and humanities education.

By 1955, the inherent shortcomings of the United States to fulfill its founding principles regarding equality and opportunity for all Americans reached a crucial point. The wealth and intellectualism brought together to overcome the disasters of unguided industrial agriculture, unregulated economic enterprise, and military nationalism produced a generation of Americans who

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saw clearly the needs of a future society. The disaster of European academics was clear to the world as Europe produced a middle class unable to resist fascism and the corruption of industrialism disguised as science and economy. This failure continued to the end of the century.

People around the world who fought for their freedom and liberty found a social system that had produced close to sixty million deaths and continued to erode our ideals and threaten more disasters. Classism, racism, theocracy, oligarchy, monarchy, and dictatorships spawned by the European academic approach destroyed much of the world across a century and produced a middle class unable to overcome racism and the misuse of nationalism to their own destruction and that of the world. Virtually every country on earth was adversely affected by the failure of European academics. Europe was reduced to rubble and ashes; the best of their academicians had to come to the United States to do their best work.

In the United States, African Americans found they could not enter stores, buy food, drink water, or find shelter, and they were not alone. Japanese Americans emerged from detention camps to find their communities destroyed and their personal possessions looted. Hispanic Americans who fought in large numbers in Europe and the Pacific were similarly burdened with racial laws and the disguised slave labor of Bracero programs invented by Libertarians in crop-growing states in order to gain government-subsidized profits.

Education in the K–12 areas improved dramatically after World War II, benefitting from technology and the spread of global awareness. The new technologies of jet aircraft, rockets, missiles, guidance systems, television, chemistry, and physics ushered in a booming economy that saw factory workers form suburban communities based on professionalism rather than mean labor. The United Nations sought to address conflicts among nations and monitor the rights of people in a promise to assist a world that had paid dearly for the mistakes and failure of European culture.

This produced generations of American youth who were too well educated to blindly accept the limitations of the past. The promises of a classless society were compared to the present, and the gaps were too glaring to ignore. By 1955, the African American community began a civil rights movement to address the problems that were no longer tolerable for Americans who had fought for freedom against tyranny, and new generations of college students joined with them to advance the promise of freedom. This created an unsailable moral high ground, a set of arguments for which there was no logical or reasonable rebuttal. No one could say that African Americans were wrong to demand their rights; only hate and prejudice that relied on emotions and the twisting of the intellect to produce an unfair environment could stand in opposition.

The American academy was challenged to face the questions European society and its academic institutions failed to answer, and this was a reasonable expectation. The US academy produced the major inventions and developments that continue to guide the world today in transportation, communication, computerization, agricultural technology, energy development, architecture, and social planning. But there was a major problem in the US academic approach that needed to be faced in 1969.

The old concept of academic disciplines as founded and expanded from European academics was too limited to produce a society that could function properly. The old systems ignored and left out the history and accomplishments of most of the people of the world, concentrating on the enshrinement of European scholars and their own cultural mind-sets. Not only did this limited view not take into consideration the needs of other people, but also it ignored the answers they could provide to solve problems. The old system not only limited the ability of ethnic minorities in the United States to enter into and benefit from higher education, but also failed to capitalize and expand research into areas of non-Eurocentric invention or interest.

Although the inventiveness of non-Europeans was fully evident in the cultures, architecture, and development of people around the globe, these advances were, and many times still are, seen as oddity, as mystery, and inexplicable. How could American Indians develop mathematics and astronomy often superior to that of Europe invention? How could Africans develop architecture that could not be duplicated by Europeans? How could Asians develop chemistry and social planning that remained in advance of Europe for hundreds of years after recognized contact between the continents? How could Polynesians develop navigation technology superior to that of Europeans without industrial products or Western scientific theory? How did the Indians of Mexico develop a new plant—maize corn—now the most commonly eaten food on earth for humans and animals, without European science? The answer for many still is “they must have been contacted by people from outer space.” It is still easier for some to imagine an alien race from a distant planet, using an unknown technology, coming to this planet out of trillions of choices and imparting this knowledge than to believe American Indians are smart enough to have created their own culture, that Africans are ingenious enough to be their own teachers, etcetera.

The accomplishments of the world cannot be reduced to science fiction in order to preserve a European sense of exceptionalism. By 1969, the University of California had recognized that this was no longer acceptable. We realized we had robbed ourselves of important information that could aid our pursuit of a functioning society that valued all human accomplishment based on a diversity of cultural worldviews. We recognized that all human momentum did

not need to be filtered through the limitations of any one cultural mind-set. Excellence could only be achieved by including all in our pursuit of a forward-looking academia.

The failure of old cultural views to include all people in the considerations of human need and to incorporate the benefit of their ideas was not acceptable in a world emerging from the holocaust of the past and hoping for a better future. In short, a new academy needed to be formed. One that included new authors, new theories, and theorists, one that valued ideas that were foreign to European-based academic departments, which needed to be fed from an interdisciplinary approach. Not a vague concept of “interdisciplinarity” but a reformation of information that had been placed piecemeal in many areas of inquiry but had not been brought together. The pieces of the puzzle were scattered in art history, anthropology, literature, mathematics, chemistry, political science, philosophy, folklore, and other disciplines.

The idea of creating IDPs that actively sought to find those puzzle pieces and bring them together to reveal a larger picture was the obvious and progressive option, and UCLA led the way. The African American and American Indian programs joined with Chicano studies, Asian studies, women’s studies, Polynesian studies, and other new IDP efforts that would include the voices of communities left out of academic discourse.

Forms of medicine, chemistry, metallurgy, biochemistry, architecture, art, music, literature, and other products of high human endeavor were brought together in IDPs that fulfilled academic, social, and cultural ideals. Native people moved from being the subjects of inquiry for Europeans to being valued as experts in systems not fully understood by old approaches. History needed to be rewritten, and the benefits of all human invention needed to be made available for the academy to remain relevant to a world set free by the actions of millions who sacrificed to raise the planet from the ashes of European-centered academics and the failed society that created. Without the Marshall Plan, Europe would still be trying to recover from a new Dark Age; without the American academic approach, the world would lack the technology we depend upon today.

My point at this conference examining the potential future for American Indian studies is my ardent reminder of our great accomplishment. Today, we have a non-European academy in the United States that accompanies the European model. We have degree programs that are as rigorous and productive as any of the older models and whose futures are more fertile as we gather new information by using new methods.

We cannot afford a return to the old in the twenty-first century, though there is a big effort to do that. Students travel abroad to visit Prague during degree pursuits instead of traveling to Yellowstone National Park. Students

visit Rome and London instead of Chicago and New York. A call for “practical” education designed to reinforce industrialism is favored over liberal arts and IDPs by many administrators and legislators, just as it was in Europe before World War II. Gains made by minority communities in American academia have been contested at each step, and the desire to “ghettoize” studies programs in their own divisions rather than incorporate them throughout the curriculum is a constant tension in academic planning.

The return of human remains from museums and laboratories to American Indian families for reburial, the defense of American Indian religion, the exploration of diabetes treatment, and the telling of the story of the development of the New World from an indigenous viewpoint are some of the benefits that have come from American Indian studies. The United Nations has issued a Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples after decades of struggle opposed only by Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

We cannot imagine a degree in international studies as not including indigenous study as a key component. Aboriginal groups of Australia have control of major resources, not only undeveloped natural materials but also municipalities like Perth. California Indians are the single-largest contributors to political campaigns in the state. Indigenous leaders are assuming the presidencies of South American nations once again. The populations of Europeans and their descendents in the United States are in decline. American Indians are not the “vanishing American” of Zane Grey’s imagination, nor are we survivors of an historical inevitability. As a continuing and growing population, American Indians have future needs from the academy as do all people of the world, and we have more to give and share.

As we contemplate the future of American Indian studies in the twenty-first century, we must renew and strengthen our understanding and appreciation for the enormous accomplishment we have formed in the American academy: a non-European academy. We must continue to support and benefit from the intellectualism of IDPs as well as enjoy the inclusion of all of our communities in the life of the campus. We must remember and promote our interdisciplinary studies approach as an American development that continues our legacy as the educational effort of all people. We must continue to pursue excellence.