

The idea for the International Indigenous University (IIU), came to me as a beginning PhD student at the University of New Mexico, under the tutelage of Dr. Greg Cajete. It came out of frustration as an employee of UNM and anger as a Native American student. As an employee I was able to see the pitfalls of a Western university, especially where Native people were concerned. As a student I was able to feel those pitfalls. My frustration and anger are illustrated in this introduction to my first draft of the original Indigenous University concept.

“In today's society one 'measure of a man' is his education. If someone is educated at a prestigious institution they are considered more knowledgeable and acceptable than someone without a formal education. Those with the highest honors, a Ph.D., J.D., or an M.D., are accepted as experts and their words somehow mean more than anyone else's. As a matter of fact, people will pay them to give their words. When important issues are at stake, these are the individuals our society looks to for answers. A person with less formal education (but perhaps more experience), will not be heard or taken as seriously as the 'scholar'. This being the case, anyone wanting, or needing to be heard, must have an advanced degree to be accepted as having a valuable opinion.

The people who created this valued hierarchy of education are the same people who created, and continue to control, the system that built it. Those people are, predominately, white males. The system was built by, and more importantly, for them. The education reflects and fosters the values of its creators. It deems important and valuable what its creators deem important and valuable. The curriculum, which its creators consider to be basic and mandatory, is no more than a value judgment made by one small group. The problem with this is, as a more diverse group of students enter universities, reflecting the more diverse United States, the curriculum increasingly fails to meet the needs (and values) of its students. Often non-white students are caught in conflict with the curriculum, and the whole system, which fails to have significance or relevance to their lives. It is, therefore, easy to understand why graduation rates of white students is so much higher than for non-whites; because white students (for the most part) are validated every step of the way.

Many people of color have attempted to get through accredited universities in the U.S. with mixed results - favoring the negative. Some students give up on themselves and judge themselves as the system judges them, as failures. And they have failed at what? At being something they are not - white. The goal of education should not be to change a black person into a white person, but to enrich and broaden the white or black person in who they already are. That has not, however, been the belief of the controllers of the system. They believe that their way is right for everybody.

This puts people of color at a large disadvantage having to make terrible sacrifices. On one hand they could disagree with the system and walk away in protest, but on the other hand, if they do that they will have no clout when they try to change the system. The problem is that the system creates the need for itself and some people end up flopping around in it like a rock in a tumbler.

Unfortunately there are few options for people in this position. One, as I mentioned, is to drop out. Or you could stay in and fight an upstream battle but you will also obtain emotional scars as you go along and you could quite possibly lose yourself in the process. A third option is to go to an 'alternative' or liberal college, but often times those are either not accredited, or if they are, they are seen by academics as Mickey Mouse universities that hold no weight in their circles of influence. This is where students find the truth behind the saying - "Between a rock and a hard place."

There have been many attempts to change the system and develop a more realistic and reflective curriculum. But the system is so rigid and so politically imbedded, that instituting change is like an ant trying to pull a juggernaut. Educators who try to implement change usually end up falling into one of three categories: those who get eaten up and eventually buy into the system, those who get frustrated and leave the system, or those who push and make some changes and then get forced out of the system. This makes change a very slow process.

To understand what the implications of this situation are at the individual level, I must move this discussion to a more personal level, to my own experiences. Given all of the factors discussed thus far including the restrictions and compromises a person has to make, is it worth it? Is it worth it to me? If I leave now without my Ph.D., I won't have the status needed to make any changes. If I do get my Ph.D., I will have to compromise myself and put myself through more emotional trauma. And when I do have my Ph.D., will the work I do be valued and accepted in my community? Will helping young students get into this system be the right thing to do, especially in light of what I know they will have to go through? And knowing how many restrictions I will be under for tenure and such, will I be able to push and make changes without getting fired? It just doesn't seem, to me, as if this is a viable option.

All of this being said, where do we go from here? I'm not one to be given several bad choices and accept them. I always believe there is another option. I think people get caught into other people's boundaries and cannot see beyond them. So I have looked over those boundaries and have seen an option, it is outside the system and it is called an 'Indigenous University'. "

After having written this I made a commitment to see Indigenous University (now International Indigenous University) become a reality. Although now I am working on it at the University of British Columbia because of their institutional support for First Nations graduate students. It is here that I have looked back at my original ideas and have made some changes and am still in the development process.

The purpose for my submission of this paper to a conference audience, is to get responses and feedback on the ideas as they stand thus far. IIU is in no way ready to get off of the ground and I have no commitment with any nation to do any work yet. I am hoping that areas I may have overlooked will be spotted by others who have similar interests. Also I am hoping to see what kind of interest is out there in this type of project. I have much more written, in detail about IIU, but it is not appropriate for the length restrictions of this arena.

The following will, therefore, be an outline of my ideas for IIU -where my thoughts have taken me thus far. I hope they make sense to someone out there!

Design Concept

Originally I conceived IIU as being a large university in one location (most likely a US or Canadian tribal land). Then I started to realize some of the downfalls of large institutions such as lack of responsiveness, slowness to change, and detachment from the student and community's needs. Next I thought about the vast number of indigenous people around the world who have similar needs as do the Native American population in North America (which is my own community). I also realized that working together is the only way indigenous people are going to be able to make themselves heard and that a strength can grow from this kind of collaboration. That is when I decided that the basic design needed to be changed.

I believe that it would be more effective and serve more people if the university was to 'branch' out and have sites across the globe. This would allow many more indigenous peoples to be involved in the creation and growth of IIU. For example there might be a site on Maori land, with the Haida, the Pomo, or whomever would like to be apart of the university. (For clarity, let me state that those nations I just mentioned are not involved in any manner, have not been approached, and are probably not aware of my ideas. I am just giving examples of what could be.)

At each IIU site the structure of the university would be based on the traditional structures of the host nation. The way in which the host nation organizes itself traditionally or specifically for today's education, will be the way that one particular site of IIU will be run. Each nation also has its own rules about access to knowledge based on age, group, maturity, etc., therefore these kinds of structures need to be respected and worked within.

There will be one central IIU council that will develop basic principals to which all IIU branches will adhere, but each branch will have a say in what that includes. The council will consist of elders from each involved community, students from each community, the university development team, and faculty and staff.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The most unique aspect of IIU will be the way in which it approaches the curriculum. In most universities any curricular content involving indigenous people, if it is positive, is of an additive nature. In the US for example we have Indian Week or Black History Month, as ways to appease ethnic minorities who want to be represented in the educational system. These 'additive' formulas add little more than reasserting the fact that ethnic minorities in the US are the 'other.' We have a 'special' time to talk about them and learn about them. This is not what IIU is going to be about.

IIU will not be a place where indigenous people go to learn about their own culture or where non-indigenous people go to find out about those 'other' people. IIU is going to be a place

where indigenous knowledge is brought forth and validated. What indigenous people know, how indigenous people understand the world, as well as how the west understands the world, will be a goal central to IIU's existence.

To bring this from the abstract to the concrete I will give an example of what I mean. Let's say that one branch of IIU was with the Maori people. The site there would offer various degrees in a wide range of fields. If a student went to Maori IIU and took a course in ecology, they would not be learning about 'Maori ecology', but all ecological perspectives, through the Maori world view. Much the same is done at a western university in that all courses are taught through a western perspective no matter what the subject - it still is passed through western lenses. At the Maori site, it would be similar except that there will not be the assumption that Maori world view is the only one that exists or the only one which is valid. All world views will be treated with equal worth and validity.

Furthermore, the curriculum would be taught with the teaching and learning strategies of the Maori people. If they chose to use completely traditional methods or a combination of methods, that will be up to their people. Students attending an IIU site away from their own home, will go with the understanding that they will be in a different system in which they must abide. Assessment will no doubt be different as well as roles of instructors and students. Student will be made aware of all requirements and standards ahead of time.

UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

The IIU community will consist of the students, local community, faculty, and staff. The 'traditional' western roles of these individuals, will be quite different at IIU. Hopefully, the true sense of the word community will be realized at all sites of IIU.

Students at IIU will be not only the learners but teachers and productive community members. They will be teachers in that many will come from different places and be able to share the knowledge of their own people. They will be productive community members in that their 'assignments' will be connected to the needs of the local communities and their own community (if that is different). This means that students learning will be directly related to their reality. Abstractions will be made concrete through real experience. If there is any call for 'research' it will be done for the benefit of the community (designed between student, faculty, and community).

The local community surrounding and affected by IIU will be an integral part of IIU. As stated above they will benefit from work students may be able to do in the community. They will also act as a protective 'net' to make sure that no inappropriate knowledge is taught in the classroom. (for example ceremonial information, sacred language, etc.). In the development stages, also mentioned earlier, they will be active in establishing the structural base for the site.

Faculty will look different from that of a Western university. Some will have PhD's, some will have MA's, and others will have life degrees. Many of the teachers in our indigenous communities do not have western degrees but they are the 'specialists' in an area. They have a full life time of experience in which IIU will acknowledge. This means that the idea of tenure, of a

reward system, of degree status, will have to be different. There may be no sense of hierarchy and most likely it will be based on a combination of traditional and institutional structure. Faculty will also be learners. There will be some basic information and philosophies that the university will hold to in which outside instructors must learn. The ideal would be to have faculty taking courses through out their own careers. The ideas of research, writing, publishing, teaching, and supervising students will also change. No one faculty member will be expected to do all of those things. But all will be expected to be a mentor. There are many more fine details to the 'job description' of faculty that I will not go into now.

Staff will play a much larger role than they often do in large Western institutions. They will be a part of the council making decisions about the university. They will also be students in the same way the faculty is. And they will not be separated and divided by the terms 'academic' and 'student services'. The staff will be a part of which ever structure the IIU site calls for.

PLANNING STAGES

The design, curriculum, university community are the most unique part of IIU but there are many more elements to be discussed. However, as mentioned earlier there is not the time to discuss them here. What I would like to do now is give a rough outline of the developmental stages of IIU.

- I - Concept and Philosophical development

- II- First Council

- III- Grant Writers - Preliminary Funding

- IV- Curriculum Development (conceptual)

- V- Seek Interested Nation / Collaboration

- VI- Funding (business consultants/lawyers)

- VII- University Model

The outline above is very basic and IIU is only in the first stage making connections for the second stage. In the future when funding, business consultations, and lawyers are needed, the plan is to use indigenous peoples/companies to do the work. It will be a very long process which starts with me finishing my PhD and getting a job!

I hope this paper will bring much response as I need the feedback and hope to employ more than my own ideas and thoughts into IIU. Thank you for your time.