

Professors Work to Increase the Number of American Indians in Business

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Dan Stewart

As a student at Whittier College, Robert Jacobo relished learning more about Native American culture through courses in history and anthropology. But it was a business management course that helped him make up his mind about what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

“The professor was also doing some consulting for an Indian tribe,” says Jacobo, a member of the Fort Mojave Indian tribe. “He took me on one of his consulting trips.” That trip, he says, showed him for the first time how business practices helped the tribe and its businesses.

Today, Jacobo, who graduated in May 2011 with a bachelor’s in business administration, works as catering manager for the Avi Casino and Resort in Nevada.

In many respects, Jacobo’s story is the exception among American Indians. But his experience in college may also be a key tool to making it less so and steering more college-bound American Indian youth onto business management education.

Even more so than other minority groups, American Indians are largely absent from corporate boardrooms, executive positions in major corporations and are rare even in many small and medium-sized businesses.

In business colleges and in the business professoriate, the numbers are also dismal. Of the total number of students affiliated with the Ph.D. Project, a program that aims to steer more people of color into teaching business at the college level, only 12 American Indians were enrolled in doctoral programs in Fall 2011. In contrast, there were 243 African-Americans and 109 Hispanic-Americans. And anecdotal evidence suggests the numbers among MBAs and at the undergraduate level are paltry as well.

If there’s a glimmer of hope in business management for American Indians, it is in the tribal colleges. Between Fall 2003 and Fall 2010, the number of business graduates from tribal colleges rose 39 percent, according to Carrie Billy, president and CEO of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. During

that same period, overall graduation in business programs, including certifications, associate and bachelor's degrees, rose 25 percent.

But if a small group of business and management professors at several universities around the country have their way, the number of American Indian students majoring in business and teaching business at the university level will increase significantly.

Amy Klemm Verbos, an assistant professor of management at the University of South Dakota; Deanna Kennedy, an assistant professor of operations management at the University of Washington Bothell; Joseph Gladstone, an assistant professor of public health management at New Mexico State University; and Dan Stewart, an associate professor of management at Gonzaga University are developing strategies to attract more American Indians to business studies.

They and others who've lived in or worked closely with American Indian communities say an array of factors, including inadequate preparation in high school for the rigors of business school and a belief that business or entrepreneurship defies Indian cultural norms, contribute to the shortage of American Indians in business.

"The study of business is very quantitative," says Steve Denson, director of diversity for the Cox School of Business at Southern Methodist University and a member of the Chickasaw Nation. "It's very numbers driven. American Indians tend to go into the social sciences. Historically, there's been a trend toward the social sciences and the softer sciences in Indian country."

Then there's the matter of motivation.

Not the Indian way?

"A lot of Native American students go to college for altruistic reasons rather than selfish reasons," says Gladstone, adding that many are motivated by how the degree can benefit their communities.

"From my research, one barrier that keeps them from considering careers in business seems to be perception that it is not the Indian way to go into business," adds Gladstone, who's affiliated with both Black Feet and Nez Perce tribes.

"My research explored the history of trade among American Indians and relationships with non-Indians. American Indians have a long history of trade. Journals of the Hudson Bay Company show that American Indians were rather savvy traders. Trading is in our blood. To practice business does not go against the Indian way. The idea of business not being Indian is a recent belief in our history, since the reservation era. Ever since we've been on the reservation, our native trading spirit has been taken away from us. We've lost that spirit of entrepreneurship."

Gladstone says that, in many American Indian communities, many see capitalism as greedy or selfish.

"The expectation in Indian country is that tribes are responsible for creating and owning the businesses," he says. "I think that's a great deal of it. A lot of people don't separate owning a business from being self-centered and focusing attention on yourself."

The researchers believe that introducing American Indian perspectives into the teaching of business will go a long way to stimulating interest among college-bound American Indian students.

"One of the things that's been lacking is any mention of Native American perspectives," says Dr. Verbos. She believes that this perspective can be woven into the classroom curriculum and ultimately seep into

the corporate environment. “Our goal is to [show] what Native Americans can offer to that perspective. We’ve been looking at Native American storytelling as a form of pedagogy.”

She says she and some of her colleagues are also trying to get other academics to rethink the way they teach some aspects of business and to incorporate elements that resonate with American Indians.

“One had to do with Native American values and the importance of sustainability and just looking at the positive sides of Native culture,” she says. “The leadership and the value of humility is something that is undervalued but extraordinarily important, as well as respect for all things animate and inanimate—so considering rivers and trees and all of creation as worthy of respect.”

Going beyond the classroom

The work of the professors varies. For some, it extends beyond educating young people. For example, the University of Washington Bothell has started a tribal leadership business program.

“There are 37 tribes in Washington state,” says Kennedy. “We will try to hold workshops in three centers or areas in Washington. We will develop a mentorship program and develop it into a workshop program. We will incorporate topics like budgeting and accounting, team leadership and project management.”

Gonzaga’s Stewart says their combined efforts could have long-term implications for the well-being of American Indian communities.

“In order for Native Americans to stand on their two feet economically, individual entrepreneurship is going to have to be key to that,” he says.

Denson says the relatively recent emergence of thriving businesses in several Native American reservations makes the study of business even more critical for some tribes.

“With the onslaught of casinos, lots of them are buying hotels,” he says, adding that the sovereignty law permits tribes to reserve jobs at these businesses exclusively for their people — something many of them routinely do. “You want it to be managed by your people, so money stays in the community. They take the revenues and build hotels, then golf courses, and before long they have built this getaway. Several tribes have done this. Using the money to encourage kids to go to college and hopefully study business and hotel management.”

Verbos, a member of the Pokagon band of the Potawatomi Indians, says that’s why she and some of her colleagues try to help students see the big picture.

“Every fall, we go in and talk to first year experience students and talk about why took business as a major,” she says. “We show them what they can accomplish with business degrees. The need for people with business degrees is high. Hiring people from your own tribe is the first goal. We also see cross-tribal hiring. To have those skills within the tribe is a future goal. My tribe has economic development arm. We are getting into manufacturing, defense contracting and architectural engineering. We’re looking at a broad array of opportunities.”