

Engaging and Transforming the Academy: Woodlands Wisdom

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I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at the University of Minnesota, with an Extension and research appointment. Although I was trained in the area of lipid and cholesterol metabolism, my career path changed as I became involved in a Kellogg Foundation Food Systems Professional Education Project. This project became known later as “Visions for Change,” and through it I began to build relationships with individuals who saw the world in a fundamentally different way than myself and who were influential in broadening my perspective of the world. These different perspectives were fascinating to me, in part because I felt in my own professional work a disconnect between the research questions I could address as a scientist and the pressing diet and health issues of society.



Craig Hassel (center).

While I was deliberating about my faculty role in a comfortable ivory tower environment, on the reservations across the Upper Great Lakes Region Indian people were, and are, suffering. American Indian Woodlands Peoples currently suffer six-fold higher rates of diabetes mortality, two-fold higher rates of coronary artery disease mortality, and two- to three-fold higher rates of childhood obesity than do Americans in general (Great Lakes EpiCenter 2002; Indian Health Service 2002). Woodlands tribes are defined as those tribal people whose heritage reflects the Algonquian language group. Prior to this century, the hunter-gatherer Algonquian cultures had a seasonal subsistence lifestyle where local resources were utilized for survival, including use as food and medicine (DeGonzague et al. 1999; Vennum 1988; Ojibwe Curriculum Committee 1973). Permanent European settlement, along with the decline of the fur trade, forced changes in subsistence patterns by limiting the land and water base from which traditional foods were harvested (Vennum 1988; Ojibwe Curriculum Committee 1973; Kuhnlein 1996). Replacement of traditional food resources such as wild game, fish, wild rice, berries, and heirloom crops with those purchased in food markets or provided by commodity food programs is widely associated with a decline in the health of Woodlands People over the past century (Kuhnlein 1996; Kuhnlein 2001; Price 1929).

In the context of this background, the concept of a nutrition project for Tribal Colleges was a vision of Pat Gailfus of Turtle Mountain Community College in North Dakota. Together with Holly Youngbear-Tibbetts of College of Menominee Nation and Kathleen O’Kelley of Leech Lake Tribal College, in the summer of 1998 these women galvanized a Confederation of six Woodlands Tribal Colleges serving communities sharing a common Woodlands ancestral heritage and lifestyle. Included were the College of Menominee Nation, Turtle Mountain Community College, Leech Lake Tribal College, White Earth Tribal and

Community College, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, and Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College.

The project was conceived as a way for their 1994 Land Grant Institutions to have a positive impact on the health of the communities they serve through culturally-based food and nutrition programs of teaching, research and community connections (Hassel et al. 2001). Their vision reflected the unique mission of Tribal Colleges to rebuild and explore traditional tribal cultures while providing disciplinary course work that is transferable to other institutions of higher education (AIHEC 1999). However, at the time, none of the Tribal Colleges had faculty with formal training or degree status in food or nutrition, despite the high incidence of diet-related disease suffered by Indian people. Nationwide in 1998 you could just about count the number of American Indian Registered Dietitians on both hands, although the American Dietetic Association only expressed its membership data in terms of percentages (Bryk and Kornblum Soto 1999). The Tribal College visionaries knew they needed partnership with a larger university to help turn their vision into reality.

After much consideration, the University of Minnesota was asked to join the Woodlands Confederation. In many ways the University of Minnesota was typical of other large land grant research Universities. Although it had turned out some 500 Registered Dietitians since 1972, only one of these R.D.s was American Indian. These statistics reflected a larger historic and cultural disconnect with American Indian people, but through its work in “Visions for Change,” Tribal College organizers saw signs that the University of Minnesota was perhaps ready to enter into a confederacy partnership. It then joined with representatives from the six Tribal Colleges at the first formal confederation planning meeting, hosted by Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College in December 1998.

The project was given the name “Woodlands Wisdom” with a goal to create a regional community consciousness around how food and nutrition impacts community, family, and individual health and well-being. Four objectives were identified as necessary to be met in order to reach this goal:

- (1) To increase the number of American Indian practitioners in dietetics, nutrition, and food science;
- (2) To identify and research the relationship of diet to health.
- (3) To increase community engagement/involvement with issues of diet and health.
- (4) To create a mechanism for networking throughout the Upper Great Lakes region in order to share resources and information to meet the goals and objectives of Woodlands Wisdom.

The alarming rates of chronic health problems such as diabetes and heart disease among Native Americans gave rise to the need for a collaborative, culturally relevant solution. The confederates recognized that health problems in the Native American communities did not appear overnight, and that discovering practical remedies would require patience, sustained development, and hard work. Woodlands Wisdom was therefore committed to the task of helping people help themselves.

As the project gained momentum, subcommittee work developed and expanded. A steering committee, a communications committee, and an academic/curriculum committee were charged with leading the efforts to develop strategic and funding plans, communication plans, and the degree program, respectively. Throughout this organizing, Tribal College staff played leadership roles in the conceptualizing and design. The project offers a model for Tribal

Colleges in engaging community partners in research and outreach that will benefit both the community members and academic work. Capacity building at Tribal Colleges is needed to facilitate formal education of tribal members in the field of food and nutrition science.

A central presumption of the Woodlands Wisdom Nutrition project is that developing more American Indian nutrition and health professionals, including dietitians, is critical to the effectiveness of and sustainability of any large-scale, long-term diet and lifestyle intervention. Why are there so few American Indian dietitians? Our initial conversations created an understanding that current nutrition science curricular offerings do not acknowledge American Indian worldviews or cultural understandings, especially if these ideas do not correspond to scientific understandings. The model supports Native American worldviews and pedagogy, in part to encourage more Native Americans to continue in the fields of food and nutrition science.

The ancient science perspectives of Woodlands cultural worldviews offer fragments of an elegant and sophisticated ancestral system of understanding the relationships between the land, plant and animal food sources, and the health of the people (Ojibwe Curriculum Committee 1973; Ojibwe Histories 1998; Semali and Kincheloe 1999; Cajete 2000). Woodlands Wisdom was designed so that community-based knowledge and wisdom would serve as a conceptual ground, upon which biomedical and scientific understandings would then be presented. It involves faculty and students in a mutual exploration of the perspectives of personal experience, ancient science, and biomedical experimentation. By contrast, the American Dietetic Association places overwhelming emphasis on biomedical science concepts of nutrition (Bezold and Kang 1999). The broader pluralistic approach is reflected in the Woodlands Wisdom tag line, “Traditional knowledge guiding contemporary health.”

From my own perspective, contributing productively to Woodlands Wisdom required that I acknowledge an acolyte status in learning to navigate divergent worldviews (Simpson and Driben 2000; Hassel 2004). My training as a scientist implicitly taught me that Western science represented the only means to create valid knowledge about the world, and nutrition in particular. I came to recognize that my attachment to a single perspective of reality had to be revised to accommodate other ways of knowing that used fundamental assumptions unfamiliar to me. By using unfamiliar assumptions, the implicit assumptions underlying nutrition science became more visible in my mind. I began to recognize that by trying to accommodate other worldviews, I could understand my own worldview with greater insight. While my content expertise in nutrition was needed, it could represent a barrier to progress if I could not begin to relate to the worldviews that ground indigenous knowledge and understandings.

The pro-active approach of Tribal Colleges of Woodlands Wisdom, combined with their insistence on equal partnership, were the principles that sustained the confederation while providing sparks of transformation. A significant outcome of Woodlands Wisdom is the continued education of University of Minnesota faculty and staff in learning how to become equal partners with Tribal Colleges. While much of the investment of Tribal Colleges to the project involves leadership for project activities, significant resources of time and effort have been offered by Tribal College personnel to educate University of Minnesota faculty. This education process has been an essential investment to the project. I am still learning what it means to be an equal partner and to move ahead as a confederacy. I was taught to compete and to build a research program fiefdom. I have had to do some unlearning and have begun to rebuild a stronger, more fundamental perspective of what academic faculty work should be

about in the twenty-first century. The University of Minnesota would need to learn about equal partnership by learning to share resources without control, without “owning” the project or its outcomes. It would need to learn how to become a partner by recognizing that Tribal Colleges have valuable understandings about how the University should apply its resources to create a more sustainable involvement.

The Tribal Colleges are committed to the Woodlands Wisdom project—and that commitment comes at substantial cost, whether measured in terms of human or financial capital. Woodlands Wisdom attempts to partially offset these costs in a number of ways. The Tribal College partners looked to the University of Minnesota for a commitment of resources for office space, funding for a project coordinator with support staff, and an expense budget. In July 2000, the University of Minnesota granted five years of support to Woodlands Wisdom. These funds were leveraged for a \$ 2 million award from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to get the programs established at each of the Tribal Colleges. Despite these successes, subsidizing faculty participation in the academic work of Woodlands Wisdom remains a primary obstacle that the project must overcome.

I believe that Woodlands Wisdom is helping higher education to redirect some of the focus of our academic inquiry from acquiring factual knowledge to cultivating wisdom. There is the tendency of much science and technology to serve the interests of the wealthy and the powerful, often at the expense of the interests of the poor and powerless. An alternative mode of inquiry, according to Nicholas Maxwell (1984) can be paraphrased as “the philosophy of wisdom.” I believe this philosophy is integral to Indian ways of living and is acted out in the Woodlands Wisdom project. This philosophy recognizes that the basic aim of human inquiry is to help promote human welfare by helping people to realize what is of value to them in life. It holds that our inquiry must give absolute intellectual priority not to acquiring objective knowledge, but to our lives and their problems, to the mystery of what is of value, and to the problems of how what is of value is to be realized.

Rather than acquiring knowledge, for the philosophy of wisdom, the fundamental learning is learning how to live, how to see, experience, participate in and create what is of value in existence. The central task of inquiry is to devote reason to the enhancement of wisdom, to help us develop wiser ways of living, wiser institutions, a wiser world. Knowledge and understanding of the natural world are vital dimensions of wisdom. But if academic inquiry is shaped by the philosophy of wisdom, academic learning *is* learning about how to live. In this way, indigenous knowledge is at the heart of academic scholarship.

Because of this multicultural perspective and approach, it is my hope that Woodlands Wisdom can serve as an example of how to broaden the scope and aims of academic inquiry within our 1862 Land Grant Institutions as well. As I look ahead, I see our higher educational land grant institutions as places where different forms of knowledge and methods of inquiry can be openly and freely shared and exchanged. As of now, our 1862 Institutions have a difficult challenge ahead to resist the powerful precedent and impulse to act as the authority and arbiter of factual knowledge and truth.

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