

Building and Strengthening Native Communities through the Institute for American Indian Research at the University of New Mexico

By Lloyd L. Lee

In August 2007, I started my visiting professorship in the Native American Studies department at the University of New Mexico (UNM). Dr. Beverly Singer, the Institute for American Indian Research (IFAIR) Director and a colleague, asked me if I would attend the first IFAIR meeting of the fall semester. I said sure. I knew about the institute through my former dissertation chair Dr. Amanda Cobb although I did not know a great deal of what the institute had done since it started and its goals. After the meeting, I knew I wanted to invest my time and energy into the institute.

I've been involved with the Institute for American Indian Research since the first meeting over ten years ago and continue to remain active believing in its mission and goals. Its mission and goals are tied to the strengthening and building of Native Nations, communities, and peoples through research, service-oriented scholarship, and supporting initiatives helping Native peoples, communities, organizations, and nations.

In the Fall of 2004, American Indian faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences at UNM proposed to create an Institute of American Indian Research. The faculty knew about the long and complicated relationship between UNM and Indigenous peoples. UNM acted frequently as a colonizer and a place where Indigenous peoples were objects of study and not contributing members of the university. Since the creation of IFAIR, the university has made strides to better their relations with Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations within the state of New Mexico and elsewhere. It still has a ways to go however efforts to change this relationship are taking place with various actions and the increasing number of American Indian students, faculty, and staff at UNM.

IFAIR has helped in this process through programming and activities such as hosting four Indigenous Book Festivals, providing grants for faculty and students for their research, sponsoring an Indigenous reading group to help increase the number of publications of American Indian faculty and students and campus events, and hosting the American Indian Studies Association (AISA) conference three times. The institute has served as a forum for discussion on issues critical to Indigenous peoples both within and outside the university community. It has helped create an Indigenous intellectual base, ensuring the "philosophizing" of Native thought, and offering a place, people, and resources for strong Native leadership and self-determining Native Nations and communities.

IFAIR has become a place where the building and strengthening of Native Nations and communities is encouraged and supported. It is a true "home" for American Indian students, faculty, staff, administrators, non-native allies, and intellectuals. It is a place where the support of tribal sovereignty and self-determination comes together, is highlighted, and promoted.

This article will outline IFAIR's structure, programming, initiatives, goals, accomplishments, and conclude with a focus on growth and direction.

Structure

The Institute for American Indian Research's mission was the following:

1. To facilitate research that contributes to the decolonization, sovereignty, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples by providing initiatives that support such research endeavors and by providing a forum for interdisciplinary conversation between and among Native and non-Native faculty and students committed to such issues;
2. To promote community-inspired, service-oriented scholarship that will link the university to Native American Nations and communities and generate discussion of Indigenous issues both within the university and in the surrounding area;
3. To recruit and retain American Indian faculty members and graduate students and nurture American Indian intellectuals at every level;
4. To generate intellectual and financial resources for the Institute;
5. To support all initiatives of the Native American Studies (NAS) program and to coordinate new initiatives with NAS and other existing and future Native program, Institutes, etc.¹

American Indian faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences organized the mission statement. They wanted to create a space home for Native peoples and communities, inclusive of all peoples, and a significant partner in supporting tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

Along with a mission statement, they created a governance structure within the UNM system. The institute reported directly to the office of the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences. The proposed structure included a director, executive board, advisory board, and affiliated faculty. The executive board chose the director and she or he would serve a two-year, renewable term. It was preferred the director would be selected from among the members of the executive board.

The director's duties included: (1) to organize meetings of the executive board and advisory board; (2) manage the institute's budget; (3) oversee any work-study or staff position; (4) develop and coordinate initiatives with the executive board, Native American Studies, and other Native American programs and institutes; (5) spearhead outreach with Native Nations and communities; and (6) generate intellectual and financial resources for the institute.² The director received a supplemental activities compensation and/or a course release with the permission of the director's department.

The members of the executive board are supposed to serve three-year terms. Some board members can serve a fourth year in order to provide continuity. The board consisted of five to seven members. The majority of the members held tenure or tenure-track faculty positions at UNM. Other members were lecturers or graduate students. The primary duty of the board was to develop and coordinate institute initiatives.

Other UNM faculty members became affiliated with the institute at the invitation of the executive board. The executive board did not place a cap on the number of affiliated faculty. Affiliated faculty had to support the institute's initiatives.

On average, the executive board was consistently nine members from 2004 to 2016 and a few affiliated faculty based on who could participate in meetings and the institute's initiatives. IFAIR has been reconstructed to include a director, a small executive board, and graduate assistants.

Initiatives & Programming

IFAIR developed and followed through on several initiatives, programs, and activities. One of the first initiatives established small grants for American Indian graduate students, faculty, and student clubs and groups for events. The grants ranged from two-hundred fifty to a thousand dollars for graduate student and faculty research. Student clubs and groups also applied for event grants ranging in the same amount. The rationale for the grants was to help support Native American research and activities tied to the mission and purpose. While the grants were small, they helped make students and faculty aware of the institute supporting their research and scholarship. The availability of grants has been sporadic yet small funding continues to help with research and programming.

The focus on Native American graduate students continued with the first IFAIR Indigenous graduate students conference with the theme of "Sipapu Secular: Planting Seeds of Our Research." The conference was held April 3 and 4, 2008. The opening session was a panel discussing "What is Indigenous Self-Determination in Education" with several American Indian faculty and community scholars. Dr. Gerald Vizenor provided a keynote at the gala dinner. The title of his talk was "Native American Narratives: Theories of Resistance and Survivance." Eight graduate students from Canada, Oregon, New Mexico, Illinois, Kenya, and California presented. The topics were diverse ranging from examining the buffalo, the power of stories, basket weaving, anthropology, environmental protection, Indigenous science, health, and identity. Along with the graduate student presentations, UNM faculty provided responses to each student presentation.

Discussion among the executive board and director on future goals and priorities occurred during this time and the idea of IFAIR becoming a clearinghouse for UNM, the state of New Mexico, nationally, and internationally was mentioned however nothing developed.

In 2010, executive board member Dr. Kathleen Washburn suggested an Indigenous book festival. The idea was to invite Indigenous authors and writers to talk about their books. The theme "Claiming the Word" was chosen and twenty-one Indigenous writers and authors were invited including Esther Belin, Sherwin Bitsui, Gregory Cajete, Jennifer Denetdale, Joy Harjo, Evelina Zuni Lucero, Don James, Glenabah Martinez, Ann Massmann, Sara Marie Ortiz, Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, Leslie Marmon Silko, Beverly Singer, James Thomas Stevens, Laura Tohe, Jace Weaver, and Maria Williams. IFAIR also invited Creative Writing students from the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The book festival focused on Indigenous peoples' perspectives and worldviews. The sessions were funny, engaging, and thought-provoking. Over two hundred people attended the two-day festival. It was a success and many of the people who attended asked if this was going to be an annual event. The festival took a tremendous amount of work for the executive board and director to put together and the possibility of having it every year was unrealistic based on the cost however they felt they could have this event every other year. The director and executive board agreed to have the book festival every two years.

After the inaugural book festival in 2010, IFAIR held three colloquium talks in spring 2011 with Dr. Jessica Metcalfe, Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, and Dr. Myla Vicenti Carpio. The institute was a main sponsor of the Viola F. Cordova Memorial Symposium hosted by the Native American Studies department. Each talk was a success and well attended.

During this time, IFAIR began to host an Indigenous reading group named Indigenous Scholars in Dialogue for Critical Consciousness (ISDCC). This reading group was made up of Native American faculty and graduate students. They came together once a month to share their works in progress and to get feedback from the group members. They usually meet on a Friday during the lunch hour and the institute would pay for the lunch. On average about ten to twelve people participated.

In April 2012, IFAIR held its second Indigenous Book Festival. The festival focused on Critical Indigenous Studies. Over thirty Indigenous authors, scholars, and writers were invited. The range of topics and dialogues focused on settler colonialism, performing collective memory, Critical Indigenous Studies, environment and sustainability initiatives, cultural revitalization, storytelling, erotics of sovereignty, Indigenous intellectual history, word graphics, creative writing, fiction, the publishing industry, poetry, and music. The festival was a huge success as over three hundred people attended the two-day event. While the first festival celebrated Indigenous writing, storytelling, and the authors and writers, the second book festival interrogated different topics related to Indigenous Studies and how research and scholarship impacts and transforms Indigenous communities. The writers and authors brought experience, knowledge, and understanding of various Indigenous communities in North America into deep dialogue and analysis of how the written word and intellectual capacity has transform Indigenous communities for the better.

In Fall 2012, Dr. Lloyd L. Lee became director. Dr. Lee wanted to continue the book festival series as well as expand to do more forums, colloquiums, reading groups, grants, and online publishing. The first colloquium was held in November 2012 with Dr. Leola Tsinnajinnie's talk on *Young Indigenous Men and Women in Post 9/11 Native America: The Pursuit of Wellness, Professional Growth, Education, and Decolonization*. The second took place in spring 2013 with Dr. Jenny Tone-Pah-Hote's talk on *Circulating Silver: Exchange and Metalwork in the Southern Plains, 1800-1930*. Some additional small projects including updating the website and developing a Facebook page, sponsoring activities on campus such as the film screening of *Beyond the Mesas* with producer and professor Matt Sakiestewa Gilbert, the *Hearing Radmilla!* film screening, Dr. Sarah Deer's lecture as part of the celebrations commemorating the 40th anniversary of the founding of UNM's Women Studies and Women's Resource Center, the 2012 Rudolfo & Patricia Anaya Lecture on the Literature of the Southwest, Dr. Janelle Palacios's presentation at the UNM Health Sciences Center, Dr. Manu Vimalassery's lecture, and the ISDCC reading group gatherings. Along with sponsoring these events, IFAIR began planning for the third Indigenous Book Festival in February 2014.

Dr. Lee wanted to start an online journal to help publish graduate student and faculty research. However, the journal did not get off the ground although it is still part of IFAIR's future plans. The journal would be peer-reviewed and published twice a year with an editorial board.

The third Indigenous Book Festival with a theme of *Authenticity and Indigeneity* was held in February 2014. This festival was the first to set up a Facebook and Twitter account. Thirty-seven Indigenous writers and authors participated including Audra Simpson, Joanne Barker, Malinda Maynor-Lowery, Cristina Azocar, John P. Sanchez, Amy Lonetree, Mishuana Goeman, Glenabah Martinez, Tiffany S. Lee, Maurice Kenny, Carter Revard, David Treuer, Steven J. Crum, Patricia Marroquin Norby, Jill Doerfler, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Deborah A. Miranda, Margaret Noodin, Craig Santos Perez, Henry Real Bird, Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie, Luci Tapahonso, Tanaya Winder, Dian Million, Waziyatawin, Stephen Graham Jones, and Casandra Lopez. Dr. Audra Simpson's opening address was on "The Sovereignty of Critique." IFAIR also had a panel focusing on the festival theme. Several of the dialogues focused on technology and media, trafficking in culture, Indian Pueblo Culture Center 100 year curriculum project, and featured readings by Maurice Kenny and Carter Revard. The second day of the festival included David Treuer's feature talk on "Authenticity and the Written Word," dialogues on Indigenous history, Indigenous space in literature, reframing accountability in Native studies, crossing of nations, creative writing workshop for high school students, a keynote luncheon presentation by Craig Santos Perez titled "Beware of Falling Coconuts", writing life, culture of language, sovereignty and concepts of healing, and looking backward/forward. Nearly four hundred people attended the third book festival and many at the university and the local community expected an exciting and thought provoking book festival experience each time.

In February 2015, IFAIR hosted the 16th annual American Indian Studies Association (AISA) conference. The conference was held at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona for the first fifteen meetings. Nearly three hundred people attended the 2015 conference. The theme focused on "Sustainability of Traditional Language, Culture, and Knowledge." Twenty-nine sessions were held along with Amanda Blackhorse's keynote address "Strengthening the Indigenous Identity: Healing Historical Trauma and the Elimination of Native Mascotry."

In March 2016, IFAIR hosted its fourth Indigenous Book Festival. The theme was "Beyond Stereotype, Prejudice, & Racism." Thirty-one writers and authors participated. Over three hundred people attended. The New Mexico Humanities Council provided grant support. The festival started with an opening roundtable discussion on the theme followed by the keynote luncheon with C. Matthew Snipp. Dialogues focused on Native humor, American Indian history, a creative writing workshop for high school students, Indigenous community and planning, politics of representation and histories, Native poetry, American Indian Education and language, governance and politics, American Indian children's literature, Indigenous leadership in higher education, American Indian Feminism, and a film presentation of *Mekko*.

In August 2016, Dr. Jennifer Denetdale became the new IFAIR Director. Her drive focused on Critical Indigenous Studies specifically human rights and Native activism. In the Fall of 2016, IFAIR sponsored presentations and discussions on the Dakota Access Pipeline protest. In February 2017, the institute hosted the 18th Annual American Indian Studies Association (AISA) conference. Over three hundred people attended the two-day conference with thirty-five sessions. The keynote speaker was Simon Ortiz and the title of his talk was "Indigenous Activism and Healing: Past and Present." Along with hosting the AISA conference, Dr. Denetdale wanted IFAIR to continue to host lectures, colloquiums, and bridging some of her work with the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission to the institute's initiatives.

In October 2017, IFAIR hosted the first day of an inquiry into the death of Loreal Tsigine, who was a Navajo woman killed by police in Winslow, Arizona in 2015. The inquiry also investigated human rights challenges to border town violence and police violence against Indigenous women and peoples. Along with the inquiry, IFAIR hosted Dr. Nick Estes on Indigenous Day and Dr. Lloyd L. Lee and Dr. Teran Maigua's talk on the tenth anniversary of the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. IFAIR hosted Dr. Deboarh Miranda for a two-day writing workshop in October 2018.

In February 2019, IFAIR hosted the 20th annual American Indian Studies Association (AISA) conference for the third time with three hundred people attending.

Since the inception of IFAIR in 2004, the institute's programming continues to analyze and promote Critical Indigenous Studies and bring awareness of pertinent issues impacting Indigenous peoples, Native nations, and communities.

Future Goals

IFAIR's plan for future goals and projects include Critical Indigenous Studies along with a push to collaborate with Indigenous groups, organizations, communities, and Native Nations. Future research projects will be in the area of Native Nation self-determination, particularly specific communities both on the reservation and off, not necessarily tribal governments. The collaboration between IFAIR and the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission is one of the first steps in what will probably be additional collaborations with entities working directly with grassroots organizations and communities.

IFAIR will apply for grants specifically tied to hosting the Indigenous book festival and the American Indian Studies Association conference. They will also support conversations between faculty, students and promote community-inspired and service-oriented scholarship. Forums such as lectures, colloquiums, symposiums, and book talks will continue. These forums are essential elements of IFAIR. Many engaging, intelligent, and thought-provoking perspectives, articles, essays, and other products are probable.

Developing an online journal is a critical step for IFAIR. With its own journal, IFAIR can publish pieces from the book festivals, conferences, colloquiums, and other programming initiatives. IFAIR will request additional financial and infrastructure support from the university and other grantees. The journal can be a collaboration between UNM graduate students and faculty and expand to include publications on Critical Indigenous studies research from all across the Americas.

Along with future research projects, grants, publication support, the focus on Critical Indigenous Studies, and collaborations with Indigenous groups, organizations, communities, and Native Nations, IFAIR will continue to be housed in the College of Arts and Sciences at UNM and support all initiatives of the Native American Studies department and other existing and future Native programs, institutes, and entities.

Growth and Direction

In Fall 2004, American Indian faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences at UNM created an Institute for American Indian Research. Since then, IFAIR has helped to develop a different and

sustaining relationship between Native peoples, Native Nations, and UNM. UNM for many years acted as a colonizer and a place where Indigenous peoples were objects of study and not contributing members of the university. IFAIR is helping to change the UNM landscape although the university still has a way to go.

IFAIR has hosted four Indigenous Book Festivals and three American Indian Studies Association conferences, provided grants for faculty and students for their research, sponsored an Indigenous reading group and campus events, and hosted forums for discussion on issues critical to Indigenous peoples both within and outside the university community. The institute has helped develop an Indigenous intellectual base, promoting and ensuring Native thought, and offering a place, people, and resources for strong Indigenous leadership for Native Nations, communities, organizations, and groups.

IFAIR is a space where the building and strengthening of Native Nations and communities is encouraged and supported. It is a place where the support of tribal sovereignty and self-determination is discussed, analyzed, and advocated. It is a home for American Indian students, faculty, staff, administrators, non-native allies, and intellectuals.

IFAIR's future will include a strategic plan with goals and projects constructed and implemented. One goal will be to sustain IFAIR's growth. Future students, faculty, staff, Native community members, Native Nations, groups, organizations, and communities will all be the better for it.

Notes

¹ ifair.unm.edu

² ifair.unm.edu