

**Feature Interviewee:
Cheryl Crazy Bull, President at Northwest Indian College
in Washington State**

**Interviewed by:
Elizabeth Larson-Keagy, PhD, Executive Editor,
The Journal for Civic Commitment**

President Crazy Bull is the third president of Northwest Indian College, which is located on the Lummi Reservation in Bellingham, Washington. Northwest Indian College is chartered as a “non-profit, post-secondary educational institution” by the Lummi Indian Business Council, under the authority of the Constitution and By-Laws of the Lummi Nation of the Lummi Reservation as approved on April 10, 1970, by the Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

Cheryl Crazy Bull is an enrolled member of the Sicangu Band of the Lakota Nation, also known as the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. She has over 20 years of experience in K-12, adult and higher education, primarily with Native American institutions. She holds a Master of Education in Educational Leadership from South Dakota State University, and a BS in Business Administration with Management Emphasis from the University of South Dakota.

President Crazy Bull has worked as the Chief Educational Officer in a K-12 tribal school, and was the Vice President at Sinte Gleska University. She has served on various Boards, such as Northern Plains Tribal Art Show and Market, Sicangu Enterprise Center, and the American Indian Resources Institute. She has served on several committees including the Good Road Coalition, the National Society of Fundraising Executives, and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe Economic Development Committee. She has published several articles in the Tribal College Journal, and in various anthologies.

Opening Comments from President Crazy Bull

A typical tribal college student is a woman in her late twenties, with children, who is going to school with the hope that an education will improve her life and that of her children. In the high poverty climate of Indian reservations, college is often the alternative to being jobless. The hope that brings students to our campuses is the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of our communities. Service learning and learning communities inspire students to know more about themselves and their tribal ways. These experiences can serve as the foundation for social action, which is critically needed to overcome poverty and loss in our communities.

For our students, social action is a form of “coming home” to oneself – we are the children of warriors and survivors. It feels natural to take action.

Interview Questions and Responses

- 1. President Crazy Bull, service learning and civic engagement have been very well supported at NWIC. How do you see your role as the president in enhancing and expanding service learning and civic engagement on the campus and in the community?**

When service learning came to NWIC as a formal mechanism for student and community engagement, it fit our mission of self-determination and acquisition of knowledge.

Tribal colleges are founded on the belief that the community is the source of inspiration and the place of service. In response to a tremendous need for community-based, culturally-sensitive higher education, tribal colleges promote engagement in teaching and learning opportunities, research, and service. As President at Northwest Indian College, I believe my responsibility is to ensure that there is a strong link between the college experiences of students and their “reality” in their communities. Service learning provides a structured framework to approach that linkage.

- 2. President Crazy Bull, in your role as a national leader in higher education, what ideas and recommendations would you give to other Chancellors and Presidents of Colleges and Universities, and in particular, Presidents of tribal colleges for incorporating service learning and civic engagement into their curriculum and campus life?**

Service learning is particularly culturally appropriate for native and other minority students because it provides an opportunity to explore history and social policy while engaging in social change. It is also an opportunity for students to explore privilege and access in the context of community. I would recommend that other educational leaders facilitate the identification of each person’s gift of their knowledge and skills by ensuring strong service learning and mentoring programs and by recognizing that each person seeks to be part of community as a natural human process.

- 3. President Crazy Bull, how do you see service-learning enhancing learning outcomes for your students?**

Our mission is to promote indigenous self-determination and knowledge through education. Self-determination means choice, access, and control over human and natural resources. Native Americans possess a vast array of knowledge that can inform decisions and opportunities. Service learning contributes to this mission and thus to our desire for our students to be autonomous, to be critical thinkers and to be culturally competent.

- 4. President Crazy Bull, how do you think that service learning and civic engagement strengthens and reinforces teaching, learning, and community building for faculty, students, and community members?**

In many traditional tribal societies there were various rites of passage that individuals went through at key times in their lives. The loss of these experiences due to oppression, family and community change, and poverty means that many individuals enter higher education uncertain as to their identity and without a strong knowledge base from which to thrive. Tribal colleges integrate cultural experience and knowledge with western education. Service learning and civic engagement provides us with the practical application of what we know works – individuals make a difference when they take action and they become better learners when education is linked to action.

5. President Crazy Bull, how do you see service-learning and civic engagement aligning with your accreditation guidelines?

Service learning experiences and learning communities help colleges and universities address key elements of accreditation – student outcomes, assessment, and community engagement. I believe that success of students – their retention and completion of their programs of study are closely linked to their engagement – so these opportunities also strengthen the most basic mission of higher education in the United States – to develop an educated, pluralistic, democratic population.

6. President Crazy Bull, what are some of the issues that face your campus and your community that are being addressed through NWIC's service learning and civic engagement programs, and, because service and stewardship are important characteristics from a tribal perspective, how do community elders view the concepts of service learning and civic engagement, and are they integral to some of the work that is done in your service learning program?

Many of our students come to us seeking more knowledge about themselves as native people along with their expectation of a high quality education in preparation for employment. Our students also want change based in a deeper understanding of their historical experience.

Lifelong, generation-to-generation learning is tribal by its very nature. I am pleased with all of the service learning activities at NWIC particularly because I am observing that these activities are very integrated and multi-disciplinary. They are not focused on a particular strategy such as environmental action but rather integrate action across several social issues and organizational approaches.

Despite over 30 years of control of Indian Education by Native people, we still struggle to create culturally-relevant opportunities. Tribal Colleges that have been using service learning strategies find that those opportunities are very grounded in community and that they can make a difference in their communities. For example, at NWIC, we are funded to support the development by students and faculty of a

course that closely examines the historical experiences of native people with racism, oppression and privilege. This gives voice to Native experience going beyond surface explanations to explore issues of treaty rights, economics, land and natural resources, and religious oppression.

I am learning that service learning is worth learning about. The more I explore the relationships among learning communities, service learning, civic engagement and student outcomes, the more relevant and meaningful this opportunity becomes. I am seeing the linkages between the teaching and learning strategies and tribal ways of knowing. As I become more knowledgeable about this, I can advocate for the development and use of service learning models at all of the tribal colleges. Tribal College Presidents and Boards are deeply concerned about the success of the individual in the context of tribal community. Service learning is an environment with considerable local, regional, and national resources that we can access to aid us in the fulfillment of our mission.

We are privileged to have Michelle Vendiola serve as our leader in the service learning area because of her commitment to social action and her knowledge of community, students and learning. Not surprisingly, she has attracted a very dedicated work group from among our staff and faculty and from the community.