Historic first American Indian Studies master's class shares thoughts on program, future goals

Arizona State University students who are members of the historic first class in the American Indian Studies master’s cohort represent tribes from across Arizona and the nation. As their first year in the new program progresses, they’re learning from distinguished faculty, each other and their own research into American Indian issues and history.

Here’s a snapshot of each member of the cohort, their impressions of the program thus far and future goals.

**Eric Hardy (Navajo)** is focusing on visual and oral culture as he earns his masters degree. As an undergraduate at ASU majoring in American Indian Studies, he focused on language immersion and ways to save languages such as his native Navajo that he is in the process of learning. Eventually, he’d like to teach indigenous languages to others, perhaps in an effort to reverse effects of historical trauma.

Working within the first class of American Indian students from diverse backgrounds and tribes gives him a chance to learn from others and delve more deeply into issues that affect American Indians such as losing languages, culture and dealing with social ills.

“We’re going deeper into the issues and exploring ways to reverse those social issues from our own indigenous knowledge,” he said. “As diverse as we are, we all have a common understanding that we are here to help our communities to change. Whether it is through economic development or cultural revitalization, what is drawing us together is knowing there is a need.”

His research interests are language revitalization, indigenous knowledge, community empowerment and decolonization.

**Justin Hongeva (Hopi)** is focusing on cultural resource revitalization and sustainability in his master’s program because he feels that language and culture serve as the base for American Indian communities.

“That should be the first thing on the list as far as rebuilding and sustainably,” he said.
With plans to earn his doctoral degree in the future, he is looking at submitting grants on a language immersion program and developing American Indian education on the Hopi Reservation to teach high-school students about their history. His research interests include language revitalization, American Indian education and American Indian running traditions.

“I don’t think the history is taught at all. I don’t think it’s right that most people know when the U.S. constitution was established, but not the year their reservation was established or why they live on a reservation,” he said.

Hongeva plans to help develop his own community of Moencopi after he earns his degree. For now, he’s part of a cohort that is learning more each day and developing strong ideas and writing skills while learning from each other.

Cliff E. Kaye (Hopi) is focusing on tribal leadership and governance in his academic concentration. His academic goals include educating American Indian communities about non-profit opportunities that they can utilize in areas such as indigenous language revitalization.

“Learning your tribal language is a lifelong process,” he said.

Kaye is interested in educating the general public and academia about American Indian Studies with an emphasis on history from an Indian perspective. He is also working toward community development as a tie in with his non-profit studies minor. Among his research interests are promoting Hopi language literacy, tribal community development, nonprofit organizations, American Indian Studies education and American Indian urban issues.

He’s enjoying working with the other members of the first class and experiencing the camaraderie of the cohort that is made up of American Indians from very different backgrounds.

“What’s exhilarating is to see how seriously the cohort is taking it,” Kaye said.

Laura Medina (Ojibwe) chose to join the master’s cohort in American Indian Studies at ASU because it offers a wide range of diversity.

“The faculty is amazing,” she said. “Our cohort is developing a really good relationship and I love every one of the books I’ve been reading so far.”

Tribal leadership and governance is her choice of concentration since she sees opportunities for improvement in this area, especially if governance is approached from an American Indian perspective.

Medina plans to write her thesis about reclaiming Yavapai knowledge on the Fort McDowell Reservation. “The older people are not connected to the younger people. I want to be that bridge. I
want to do research and get the community involved," she said.

Learning the Yavapai language is also part of the plan as she conducts research that involves the community. Eventually, she would like to travel to many reservations throughout the country to serve as an advocate for regaining culture and language.

**Waquin Preston (Navajo)** learned about the master’s program from a professor who told him he would be a good candidate for it after earning his undergraduate degree at ASU in American Indian Studies. He choose social justice as his concentration within the program since it fell in line with how he views the world and the changes he’d like to see in American Indian education.

“I really found my purpose in American Indian Studies and I really like the faculty,” he said.

Preston plans a career in education teaching on the Navajo Reservation and his thesis topic will explore American Indian education and how it has been shaped by the colonization of Native peoples to focus on individual desires such as wealth accumulation instead of looking at the community as a whole.

If his focus could be boiled down to one point it would be empowering Indian students and facilitating nation building rather than focusing on assimilation and bringing American Indians into the mainstream.

Assimilation facilitates internalized oppression and internalized oppression can then be exhibited in self harm through social ills, he added. His research interests include colonization and decolonization theory, American Indian educational policy, curriculum and teaching methods, Indian control of education, and historical trauma and unresolved grief.

**Naomi Tom (Tohono O’odham and Kaibab-Paiute)** is concentrating on indigenous rights and social justice as she earns her master’s degree. Eventually, she is planning on a career in museum studies or American Indian law.

“Being a lawyer is something I have wanted to do since I was 5,” she said.

Tom worked at the Heard Museum during an internship and she is graduate assistant to John Tippeconnic, director of the American Indian Studies Department at ASU. Her Research interests include oral histories, urban Indian identity, federal Indian policy and law and Indian gaming. She also completed an internship with Desert Diamond Casino on the Tohono O’odham Nation.

Tom is enjoying studying with a small cohort that is coming together as a cohesive group.

“It’s been really helpful,” Tom said. “There’s always someone who can relate to you.”

**Lorena Yaiva (Havasupai and Hopi)** was encouraged by her professors at ASU to continue her
studies in American Indian Studies after she earned her undergraduate degree.

As a member of the Havasupai tribe, she flies in and out of her home in the Grand Canyon to travel to ASU for classes and pursue her work as a representative of the Havasupai tribal court system. She is being trained as a tribal prosecutor and plans to continue in the legal field. In 2012, she was appointed by the Havasupai Tribal Council as the ASU Tribal Representative.

For her final master’s program topic, she is exploring ideas such as writing a thesis on language revitalization, sacred sites and land issues.

“My goal is to go back to my community and do some more research that will benefit the tribe as a whole,” she said.

Working with other students and listening to their experiences in class has given her a better idea of what other tribes are experiencing.

“It gives you a better perspective, especially of what other tribes are doing and how you can use that in your own community,” she said.

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