

1-1-2010

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J. Cedric Woods

University of Massachusetts Boston, cedric.woods@umb.edu

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Recommended Citation

Woods, J. Cedric, "A Different Path Forward: The Institute for New England Native American Studies at UMass" (2010). *Institute for New England Native American Studies Publications*. Paper 1.
http://scholarworks.umb.edu/inenas_pubs/1

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A Different Path Forward

The Institute for New England Native American Studies at UMass

J. CEDRIC WOODS

In New England, interactions between Native peoples and some public institutions have taken divergent paths over the past three decades. State legislatures and the many academic institutions that call the region home have developed different approaches to working with Native peoples.

Initially, both the academy and the statehouses responded positively to the 1975 federal adoption of a policy that moved away from paternalistic practices toward tribal self-rule, cultural survival and economic development. Legislators at both state and federal levels—recognizing a long history of neglect and discrimination against their indigenous residents—established commissions and councils to help address the needs of those residents and advocate for their rights. These councils and commissions have served to promote dialogue between New England states and their indigenous populations. Partly as a consequence of this dialogue, academic institutions created Native Studies classes, recruited Native students, and—in Massachusetts and Maine—established tuition waivers for Native students. In Massachusetts, waivers applied to all state residents who were citizens of state or federally recognized tribes, and in Maine, to state residents who were citizens of the Wabanaki (Mic Mac, Maliseet, Penobscot and Passamaquoddy) tribes.

After about a decade of generally positive interactions between the tribes and the statehouses, followed by a decade of less-friendly but at least not openly contentious relations, legislative and academic policies and practices related to tribes took somewhat different directions. Interestingly, state legislatures sometimes opposed certain efforts of the tribes, while promoting or at least permitting efforts related to enhancing educational opportunities for Native students. For example, Maine legislators actively opposed efforts to allow Maine tribes to engage in gaming. Nevertheless, they adopted legislation authored by Penobscot legislative representative Donna Loring, requiring that Native American history and culture be taught in Maine's schools. [See "The Dark Ages of Education and a New Hope: Teaching Native American History in Maine Schools," Donna Loring, *NEJHE*, Summer 2009.] In Connecticut, the state's flagship university developed a concentration and later a major and minor in Native American studies, while state legislatures actively opposed the recognition of several tribes in Connecticut and Massachusetts. In Vermont, where the University of Vermont offers courses on Native peoples as part of its U.S. Ethnic Studies program, the

state actively opposed Abenaki federal recognition and in 2008, the chairman of the Vermont Indian Affairs Commission resigned in frustration.

Why have New England state legislatures and public higher education institutions developed such different relationships with Native peoples over the past decade? How can Native peoples use their strong relationships with higher education institutions to develop more positive relationships with state legislatures?

There is no single answer. Some parties may associate the change in relationship between the state legislatures and the tribes with the advent of Indian gaming in the region. Others may point to a fear of losing control of regulating tribal territory as a result of the federal government taking land owned by a tribe and transferring it into "trust status." Still others may believe that any gain in power by tribes—economic, political or otherwise—will result in a loss of power previously held by the tribes' state and municipal neighbors. What is clear is a need for increased dialogue between New England state legislative bodies and the tribes.

Public colleges and universities, given their ongoing development and support of initiatives engaging Native communities and their connections with state governments, can and should play a role in moving this conversation forward. A model for beginning and sustaining such a conversation may be found at the Institute for New England Native American Studies (INENAS) of the University of Massachusetts Boston.

In the spring of 2009, through the collaborative efforts of the University of Massachusetts Boston, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development and the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs, and with funding from the Kellogg Foundation, the INENAS was established as a unit of UMass Boston, and I was hired to serve as director. The INENAS mission is to develop collaborative relationships, projects and programs with the indigenous peoples of the region. Within a matter of months, the institute hosted a seminar to assist tribes in identifying government and other resources that might help them meet their community needs. Representatives from 11 tribes and tribal organizations across New England participated, gathering to hear panels of tribal grant writers, government affairs professionals and grant technical assistance providers. Notably, this first activity of the institute emphasized needs and interests of regional tribes and Native organizations as expressed to UMass Boston in a survey conducted prior to the opening of INENAS.

UMass Boston's responsiveness to tribal concerns was not surprising, as its dialogue with tribes had been ongoing, and one of the university's strategic objectives is to "identify and promote signature examples of campus community engagement, with community understood in local, national and global terms." Engagement with tribes clearly fits within this community outreach objective. Tribes will participate in and benefit from university research, innovation and education, while the university community will be enriched by increased engagement with Native peoples. This increased Native presence will make voices that have been frequently pushed to the margins more audible, especially in a geographic region with relatively small numbers of Native people. Additional evidence of the university's support for increasing the Native community on its campus was expressed by the hiring in 2009 of two Native faculty members, one in the History department and the other in Environmental Earth and Ocean Sciences department.

The institute is working with tribes to help them access federal, state and private funds for social, cultural and economic development. In this way, INENAS hopes to help Native peoples build tribal government and community capacity. This increased capacity will allow tribes to become more self-sufficient and more effective advocates for the needs and goals of their communities, and to work more skillfully with state legislatures. INENAS has engaged in outreach activities with several tribes in the region and with government agencies that either have tribal-specific programs or are active partners with tribes in other areas of the country. We hope to expand these efforts to offer graduate students and faculty from a variety of disciplines opportunities to gain experience working with New England Native peoples.

INENAS is working to identify and build a community of UMass Boston Native students, alumni, faculty, staff and Native leaders from Massachusetts. As one strategy for moving this effort forward, the institute, with the assistance of internal and external partners, rewrote the UMass Boston undergraduate application to include a more comprehensive list of Native American tribal identifications. As of fall 2010, all Massachusetts tribes will be represented, as well as several other regional tribes with significant populations in Massachusetts, such as the Wabanaki. Enrollment Services and Alumni Affairs are collaborating with INENAS to

identify and recruit Native students and keep them engaged with the university after graduation.

Future INENAS activities will bring tribal leaders to campus in a variety of forums to identify ways to help their constituents strengthen their communities, to educate other individuals and groups about matters of interest to the Native peoples of New England, and seek ways to help Native peoples to work collaboratively with others—especially members of state legislative bodies. By these means, INENAS will sponsor a robust, informed dialogue about the aspirations, challenges and contributions of contemporary Native peoples of the region. The necessary participants in that dialogue include the Native communities and their leaders, academic institutions, state legislators and regional opinion leaders. In Massachusetts, as in most states, connections between public academic institutions and the state legislature already exist. The New England Institute for Native American Studies plans to facilitate the re-engagement of tribal leaders and their counterparts in state government, thereby cutting a different path toward more effective tribal-state relations.

J. Cedric Woods is director of the Institute for New England Native American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Email: cedric.woods@umb.edu.



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