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## Cross Cultural Issues in Native America: Learning Through Listening

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# **Cross Cultural Issues in Native America: Learning Through Listening**

## **Abstract**

*During March 2002 Oregon State University students took a non-traditional approach to learning about cross-cultural issues in Native America. The students lived five days in Burns, Oregon interacting with the Burns Paiute Tribe and non-Indian community stakeholders, thereby developing an understanding of the complex issues facing Oregon's Native American population.*

## **Kurt M. Peters**

Associate Professor of Comparative Ethnic Studies and Native American Studies, Oregon State University.

## **Dwaine E. Plaza**

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Oregon State University.

During spring break 2002 (March 24-28) twenty-three ethnically diverse Oregon State University students took a non-traditional action research approach to learning about cross-cultural issues in Native America. The students spent five days living in predominately white Burns, Oregon and interacted with the Paiute Native American population and related community stakeholders.

The Burns Paiute Tribe presently numbers approximately only 330 persons and has historically been one of the most ostracized and marginalized of Oregon's nine federally recognized Native American tribes. For many years in the late 20th century the Burns Paiutes were forced to roam the area without a reservation or residence for their families, homeless in their former homeland.

By carefully listening and interacting with different stakeholders including cattle ranchers, school officials, human health and service providers, casino and gaming officials, Oregon State University rural Extension Services personnel, and tribal leaders, students were able by the end of the course to develop a better understanding of the complex cross-cultural issues facing Native American populations in Oregon today. This class combined a number of pedagogical techniques including experiential learning, collaborative models of group learning, the use of field experience and the use of the Internet. The students progressed from a loose organization of idealistic, self-centered individuals to a strongly cohesive action group, able to quickly grasp the essence of situations in the field and to interact as a unit in interviewing stakeholders and creating informative websites.

In this paper we discuss our experience of merging content and process in this one-week odyssey. Through the voices of the involved students, via their daily journals, we see

their realizations unfold of the meaning of Native America in a western border-town. Their interactive sessions with tribal leaders and other representatives of the Burns Paiute community bring a wealth of understanding about the tensions underlying seemingly benign relations in this region of dwindling economy and few employment opportunities. We focus this multi-media presentation on the important role the community played in helping our twenty-three students come to a better understanding of the ways in which systemic inequality takes place in a small rural town and the connections between their own lives and this seemingly distant place.

### **Presenters**

Kurt M. Peters is of Native American descent (Blackfeet/Powhattan). He is Associate Professor of Comparative Ethnic Studies and Native American Studies at Oregon State University, and is a Master Teacher in the Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Research Program. His most recent publication is *American Indians and the Urban Experience* (Alta Mira Press 2002), recipient of the CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title 2002. [kpeters@orst.edu](mailto:kpeters@orst.edu)

Dwaine E. Plaza is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Oregon State University. His research interests include Caribbean international immigration, race and ethnic relations, and international development. His most recent publications is "Ageing in Babylon: Elderly Caribbeans Living in Great Britian" in H. Goulbourne (Ed.) *Caribbean Families in the Transatlantic World*, London: Macmillian, The University of Warwick Caribbean Studies Series, 2000. [dplaza@orst.edu](mailto:dplaza@orst.edu)