

Letters to the Editor

April 7, 1970
Home 5
Chilocco Oklahoma 74635

Dear Editor,

I'm writing this letter just to say thank you for keeping up to date with the Tundra Times.

I enjoy reading the Tundra Times in my spare time.

Also I want to thank the people, who put in their time in and coming down and visit Chilocco and talking with us.

To see the people from Alaska always make us happier and knowing that we're being remembered.

Well, it's almost that time again when everyone will be getting ready for home.

Right now everyone is busy with activities and trips to other school And are enjoying it.

Thanks again for the Tundra Times.

Sincerely
Ida K Smith

University of Washington
Seattle, Washington 98105
April 3, 1970

Dear Editor:

MY NAME is Larry Mercurieff, an Aleut from the Pribilofs, and I am the coordinator of the American Indian Program at the University of Washington. I am also the vice-chairman of the Washington State Inter-collegiate American Indian Student Association. Our program objectives in both AISA and the U of W Indian Program is to encourage Native Americans to attend college; we do this primarily by visiting schools throughout the Northwest where there are a sizable number of Native American students. We hold seminars on higher education and discuss college life in general with the high school students. Linda Belarde, a Tlingit from Juneau and a graduate student in education is working in the university program as a counselor and recruiter.

CURRENTLY THERE are many colleges and universities throughout the nation initiating special programs for Native Americans and it is necessary for Alaska Native students to be aware of them. Since there is no central agency with responsibility for disseminating pertinent information on such programs, choosing a college with special programs is generally done haphazardly by Native Americans. Many colleges misrepresent their programs in order that they may induce Native Americans to participate in their programs. The end result of such actions may mean academic catastrophe for the individual student.

WE ARE ALWAYS flooded with statistics about the high drop-out rate of Native-Americans and yet little is done to remedy this "problem." True, there are more students gradu-

ating from college today, but the number of Native Americans graduating is still far too small as compared to the national average. Most special programs have done little to increase the number of graduating Native Americans, because many programs are constructed merely to obtain OEO funds. Such programs give little consideration to the reasons for the high drop-out rates and thus do little to provide solutions.

CONSIDER SOME brief reasons which undoubtedly contributes to a high drop-out rate of Alaska Natives in college (working with the fact that most Alaska Native students attend a B.I.A. boarding school for their high-school years):

Given: 1) The majority of the B.I.A. boarding schools are segregated institutions, limiting their enrollment to Native Americans.

2) The B.I.A. assumes responsibility for the students attending its schools.

3) The student's social and academic life is closely regulated by the B.I.A. while he attends the institution.

4) Boarding school curriculum is aimed primarily at vocational-technical preparation and little emphasis is given to college preparation, with the exception of a few schools.

5) The majority of the B.I.A. boarding school teachers are non-Native American.

6) The majority of the B.I.A. boarding school employees are non-Native American.

7) The majority of the boarding school Native Americans have menial jobs and too few have any significant responsibilities or any administrative positions.

8) The job advancement opportunities for Native Americans are non-existent or slow in coming, while it is much better for a white employee.

Since the B.I.A. assumes responsibility for the students at-

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tending its schools, almost every aspect of the students social and academic life is closely monitored and regulated:

- 1) a student must get up in the morning at the sound of the bell
- 2) a student must go to bed at the sound of the bell, and all lights in the dorm are turned off at this time
 - a. a matron goes to every room to make certain all students are in bed
- 3) a student must obtain a pass to go anywhere off of the campus grounds
- 4) date functions between the young men and women are closely regulated and absolutely no "public display of affection" is allowed at any time

5) student councils are primarily rubber-stamp governments who carry out the orders of the administration. Such councils have no significant responsibilities and are poor vehicles for student leadership training.

Student needs are always met by the B.I.A.

- 1) transportation to and from home is paid for
- 2) room and board is paid for
- 3) books are paid for
- 4) medical expenses are paid for
- 5) clothes (if needed) are provided

WITH ALL THIS taking place, and no significant responsibilities of any kind are given to the students, we can expect the student to have established a strong dependency upon the B.I.A. for any needs he may have. Certainly, if a student or his parents cannot afford the necessities for obtaining an education, the B.I.A. must provide it. However, how can any individual appreciate what he is receiving if he makes no sacrifice himself?

IF THE STUDENT is only required to present his body to the school and the school handles it from there, where is there room for students to exercise their own initiative? These students become unknowing, and unfortunate victims of a system of education which stifles initiative and creates vegetables dependent upon the B.I.A. for nourishment!

THE NATIVE American who attends these boarding schools lives in a segregated, artificial environment. When the student gets out into the real world to attend a college he finds that it is completely unlike the (created) protective environment he left. Is it any wonder then, that the

student drops out or flunks out of college?

THE STUDENT is given little say in the policy and decision making which affects their educational development. Is it any wonder then, that we have so few Alaska Native administrators and leaders? How can we expect to control our own destiny if we do not learn to accept major responsibilities and to make major decisions for ourselves? Accepting major responsibilities and making major decisions are two significant qualities of an administrator and a leader; and today we cannot expect to have many of our people exhibiting these qualities because of the B.I.A. educational system!

IN ADDITION to all this, another handicap our young people face is the curriculum orientation in B.I.A. schools; that is, it is vocational training oriented. This is brought out by the fact that the great majority of our students do enter these fields.

THIS IS WHAT can naturally be expected, since the B.I.A. spends thirty to forty-seven millions on vocational technical programs, and a mere four million on higher education. Granted, there is a need for people with vocational skills, but there is an equal need for people with professional skills.

We will not have professional people because adequate academic college preparation is definitely and sadly lacking in our curriculums today. The time has come to demand a shift in this emphasis and to encourage higher-education oriented programs!

COMPOUNDING the problems of the bureaucratic educational system is the fact that competent administrators, teachers and counselors in B.I.A. are lacking. By competent, I mean: 1) being able to see the tremendous problems involved in Indian education, 2) being able to understand the cultural differences between the school staff and the students, 3) being able to adapt the educational system to these cultural differences—rather than the other way around, 4) and being able to confront the system and initiate needed changes rather than accept the situation as it stands.

CERTAIN GROUPS are forwarding bold plans to create "regional high-schools" throughout the state so that students would not be required to travel

great distances from home. Originally, the funds which will be utilized for creating these schools was to be used for renovation of Mount Edgecumbe High School. This is certainly a step in the right direction, but—are these funds adequate enough to create quality schools?

ONE NEEDS ONLY to observe the difficulty Mt. Edgecumbe had to procure competent educators to realize how much more difficult it will be for several schools to obtain qualified, competent people. Perhaps with the recent land-lease sales we may be able to procure additional funds.

IN THE MEANTIME, we must be wary of sacrificing our children to some inadequately funded project—a project which has many political intonations. If we are to advocate change in the manner stated above, then let us be certain we are creating something better than what was and not vice versa.

IT IS HIGH time for us, the Native Americans, to advocate drastic changes in the B.I.A.'s educational system. We must take the initiative. Depending on the Bureau to make needed changes will get us no-where! We must not allow our young people to be victims of a protective, dependency creating, and artificial environment which is detrimental to all of us—the Native Americans!

I have outlined these problems in hopes that the young people who read this may benefit from it. I have spent all my life in federally operated schools and I know how it works.

Such knowledge has helped us in our attempts to create programs which are of benefit to the many Native Americans who attend colleges and universities in this state. However, like all programs, we are handicapped by lack of competent personnel.

I would welcome any comments and criticisms on this letter from anyone. Also, if any student wishes information on our program here at the University of Washington, you may write to:

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Sincerely yours,
Larry Mercurieff