

# **An Important Program of Orientation**

"All in all I learned that life is swimming upstream on the rapids. But in the rapids there are some quiet pools where you content until spring comes and floods you out so that you have to swim again or go downstream."

This philosophy of life was not made by a famous person years ago, but by an Alaskan native student after spending last summer learning about himself and the world he lives in. He, along with 39 other Alaskan native high school graduates, was a part of a unique study session called the College Orientation Program for Alaskan Natives. (COPAN).

Professor Lee Salisbury of the University of Alaska, Director of COPAN, has just completed a thorough study of the program for the past three years and is now making plans for this summer's group of students.

"It is apparent that Alaska Native students are often bewildered and overwhelmed by the freedom and strangeness of college environment," Professor Salisbury says. "Often the decision to drop out or stay in school depends upon whether the student can receive support and encouragement at the time he needs it."

One of the times that the student needs this most is in the the period of transition from life in the small village and the rather strict life of high school to the time when he is "on his own" in college. There is a feeling of being alone in a strange place which must be overcome. Those who overcome it often go on to finish college and contribute to their society. Those who don't usually return to their village disappointed.

How does COPAN help bridge this gap? One of the central problems in helping Alaskan natives to help themselves is to assist them in developing a positive self image. One of the central objectives of COPAN is to increase the native student's feelings of confidence and self worth by building a respect and understanding of both the native and western cultures. But this does not take place only in the classroom. COPAN students live in western homes, eat foods that are new to them, make trips to places like Mt. McKinley National Park and a carnival, go horseback riding, and watch television and movies. Then afterward they discuss their experiences with each other.

These comments of the students were typical of their seminar sessions: "The boy (in the book) was encountered by personal experiences which is very similar to what we ourselves are going through now." "I learned about a different kind of person." The book "opened a new world, one I never heard of or realized existed." The other cultures in comparison to ours was very useful in finding out how we are related." "I have much to learn about the native Alaskan culture."

Through discussion of their own particular problems and comparing them to the problems of other people, the students were able to develop a positive self image. Armed with this, and a greater freedom and ability to express themselves, they were better prepared to make the difficult transition from one way of life to another.

Twelve of the 14 students who took part in COPAN last summer entered college. Of the six who enrolled in the University of Alaska, five are still in school and it is reported that the majority are doing well in their classes. The results of the program are being evaluated but the COPAN staff is encouraged by the changes in attitude that have taken place in the students, and their adaptation to the still new and strange surroundings.

This summer will be the fourth and final summer for the

present COPAN program. Professor Salisbury personally feels that the program has been highly successful, not only for the students, but also for the University, which is learning the special problems of the Alaskan native and is developing programs which will make it easier for the students to adapt to the university and "keep swimming upstream."

--Joel B. Fleming  
University of Alaska