History

On March 30, 2009, American Indian Studies, with the University of Washington Regents’ approval, became an academic department. This important acknowledgment of the teaching and research of American Indian Studies sent a clear message that Native Studies is of equal importance to other areas of study at the University.

The path that led to this level of status began decades before. The development of an American Indian Studies Center at the University of Washington began in the spring of 1970 following student protests calling for more diversity of UW’s curriculum, faculty, staff and students. A group of Native American students came together in a class to discuss the aims of such a program and the educational processes required to establish it. Their class project was submitted to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who approved the creation of a special faculty-student committee to explore the issues addressed in their project report and to further develop a plan in response to it. Meeting several times a week throughout the summer, the committee produced a highly interdisciplinary academic program. The American Indian Studies Center began in Autumn Quarter, 1970, with both Indian and non-Indian faculty involvement from departments that included Anthropology, Art, English, History, Sociology, and Political Science, as well as the Burke Museum.

The goals of the AIS Center were very clear:

1. increase Native American student recruitment and retention beyond the then 130 some students in all of the University;
2. create courses that would address every major area of Native American life and history throughout the College and especially in the American Indian Studies Program;
3. attract new Native American faculty; and,
4. create a place for Native American students on campus.

Co-directors, James Nason (Comanche) from Anthropology, and Frances Swensson (Lakota) from Political Science, received encouraging support from the College at a time when finances for the University were exceptionally limited. The next decade was a period of program expansion, with nearly 30 Indian part-time and full-time faculty teaching courses along with non-Indian faculty teaching courses in departments in support of the Center. In 1982, the AIS Center established a formal affiliation with the Department of Anthropology.

AIS professor Marvin Oliver was a graduate student at UW in 1971 and personally experienced the growth of the Center. In 1974 he began teaching in AIS with the introduction of his first course, Art of the North American Indians. Marvin said that “the courses were very well received,” and generated a great interest from a wide range of students on campus. One course that received a lot of attention was the AIS Lushootseed Language course taught by respected Upper Skagit elder Vi Hilbert. “Vi,” Marvin said, “really motivated the students to develop a new perspective on language by understanding how language is tied to a culture.” The course became so popular that it was offered to students as a course they could take to fulfill the University’s language requirement.

American Indian Studies did not pursue the creation of a major at this time, but instead encouraged other departments to create
Native American specialty tracks within their own disciplines. Students could formally minor in American Indian Studies or major in AIS through the undergraduate General and Interdisciplinary Program. Throughout the years the Center continued to grow and to expand its faculty. In 2001, two Native American professors were hired, increasing the full-time faculty to eight members. In 2002 AIS presented a formal request to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for a change in unit status from a Center to a Program based on its increased teaching and research capacity. In the 2003/2004 academic year AIS received status as a Program. As part of this request AIS informed the Dean of its intent to develop an AIS major, which advanced the University's objectives toward building a diverse institutional community on its Seattle campus. In the fall of 2007 the request for a major was approved and in the 2008/2009 academic year a major in American Indian Studies was offered.

In 2009, with approval from the Dean of Arts and Sciences, American Indian Studies gained approval to become an academic department, completing its journey to full recognition from Center to Program to Department.

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