

## Local colleges struggle to connect with Native American communities

Connecting with Native American communities has long been a challenge for colleges, but Rochester Institute of Technology President Bill Destler has decided that the best way to make this link is in person.

Destler's June visit to the Onondaga Nation Longhouse south of Syracuse promoted a sense of friendship that is already evident on the RIT campus — where Native American clubs and courses abound.

"It's important to really understand the culture — how things are done," said Samantha Burr, a Native American who graduated from RIT in the spring and attended the Destler-chiefs meeting.

Destler has also learned that connecting with Native Americans, both on campus and on the reservation, makes educational sense. RIT's graduation rate for Native Americans — 93 percent for the past five years — is more than twice as high as the national average for Native Americans.

RIT's outreach to Native Americans includes helping with the start-up of the Iroquois White Corn project at the

Ganondagan State Historic Site in Victor — once the hub of Seneca Nation.

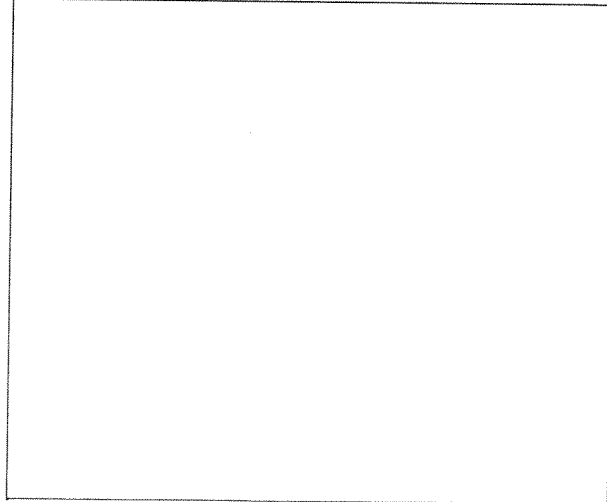
Still, the number of Native Americans enrolled at RIT and other local colleges is small. And Burr, 37, did not always find RIT welcoming. When she first enrolled there in the mid-1990s, she felt isolated — and dropped out.

The U.S. Department of Education put the total Native American enrollment at about 500 last school year for 12 Rochester area colleges, which had an overall enrollment of about 85,000. Because this 500 figure doesn't include Native Americans who identify themselves as multiracial, the actual number of Native American descent is somewhat higher.

But the kind of outreach evident with RIT is more the exception than the rule. Other local colleges are making headway but not forging strong connections with Native American communities.

"More relationships with Native

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communities need to be built or strengthened," said University of Rochester Native American student Chris Bethmann, 21, who as an intern in UR's office of admissions is helping in recruiting.

## Fertile ground

The inability of colleges to address the needs of Native Americans, who nationwide according to the research group The Education Trust have about a 39 percent graduation rate from four-year colleges, spawned tribal colleges in western states. These schools are typically two-year colleges on reservations and serve as a bridge between Native American communities and four-year colleges.

A variation of this model could work in New York by having existing colleges connect more with Native Americans at a high school age or earlier, said Carrie Billy, president and CEO of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, which represents 37 tribal colleges.

New York — birthplace of the six-nation Iroquois Confederacy — is steeped in Native American history. More than 20,000 Native Americans live in western New York.

Most of the local colleges have not forged strong ties with Native American reservations — the cradle of Native American culture that provides a spiritual home for many Native Americans, whether or not they live on reservations.

UR assistant education professor Stephanie

Waterman, who has written about the Native American college experience, tells of the importance of colleges connecting with the reservations, involving families in campus events and offering the necessary support for Native American students at school.

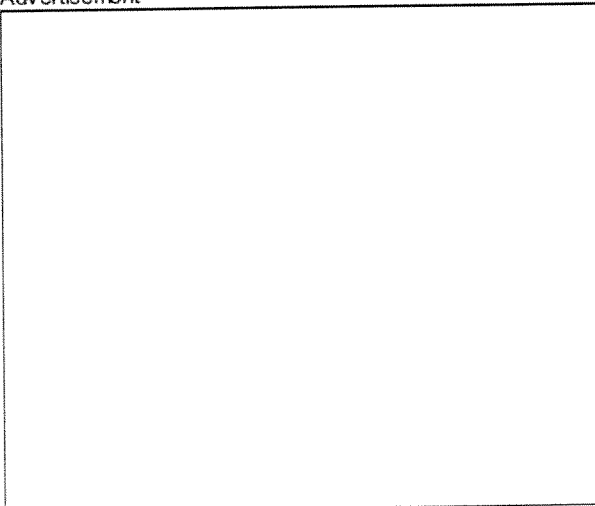
She notes that studies show that students must become involved in the college to succeed in school — but with family playing such a critical role for Native Americans, many of these students frequently go home on weekends or transfer to colleges close to home.

"When your people have been decimated, it's very important to have family first," said Waterman, who is Native American.

As a first-year student at Nazareth College in 2006, Bethany Printup-Davis went from living on the reservation of the Tuscarora Nation to a college campus where almost no one was Native American.

One of the ways she adjusted to what she

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now calls "Naz" was with the help of the college's Center for Service-Learning, which gave Printup-Davis, as part of a Native American history course, the opportunity to work with the Ganondagan State Historic Site in Victor to develop lesson plans for teachers.

Printup-Davis, who graduated from Nazareth in 2011, considered her service-learning work "an acknowledgment of Native Americans," and is now an assistant with the City School District's Native American Resource Center.

## Outreach efforts

Monroe Community College has the largest population of Native Americans among local colleges, with almost 300 Native Americans enrolled last school year.

The college's Native American Initiative provides support services for student — ranging from tutoring to mentoring — and provides outreach to the community.

"Programming often includes student participation in community events aimed at the Native American community," said MCC spokeswoman Cynthia Cooper.

And while MCC does not have a Native American major, the college offers a diversity and community studies associate's degree that incorporates a Native American perspective.

Next spring, the MCC Foundation, with a \$24,000 gift, will provide scholarships of

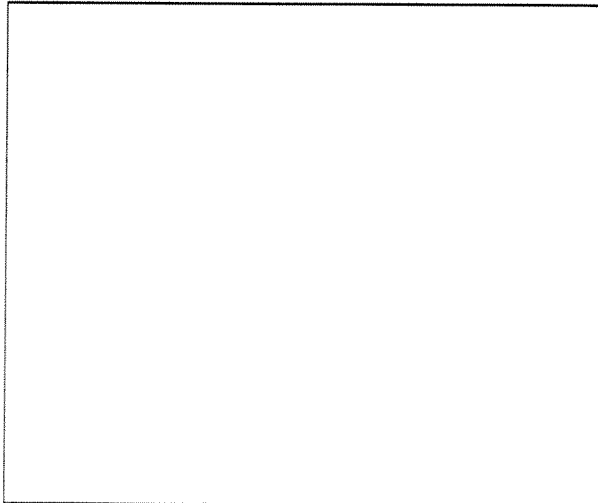
\$1,000 to \$3,000 to some Native American students.

MCC assistant English professor Angelique Stevens, who is of Native American heritage, said that she has mentored two students under the Native American Initiative but that the college needs to be make a stronger commitment in outreach and programming.

At the State University College at Geneseo, a minor in Native American Studies has provided fuller understanding of the history that shapes some of today's political debates about Native Americans. Courses on American Indian Law and Public Policy and Indian Land Rights are among the offerings.

"These are issues all students should know about — the gaming issues, issues involving taxation and issues involving economic development in the territories of the various nations," said history professor Michael Oberg.

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Geneseo also attends the Seneca Nation's Cattaraugus Indian Reservation's annual college night.

The College at Brockport has, likewise, attended college fairs at reservations. And Nazareth recruits from high schools in the state that have a significant number of Native American students while the college runs various projects reaching out to this population.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva work closely with the staff of Onondaga Community College — a school that has many Native American students — to attract transfer students.

Genesee Community College has hooked up with school districts adjacent to the Tonawanda Indian Reservation and has a Native American Student Club, while St. John Fisher College includes its recruitment of Native Americans as part of its outreach efforts to minorities.

Joining the College Horizons pre-college program in 2010 has given the University of Rochester access to the Native American students involved in this initiative. Last summer, UR hosted almost 100 Native Americans for a College Horizons week-long program.

UR also held a summit in 2010 for local Native American leaders — and has another slated for August.

“But you have to organize on campus and have people who are willing to make sure t

hat students are retained and graduate,” said Ganondagan site manager G. Peter Jemison, who attended the first summit and plans to go to the upcoming one.

## Making a commitment

RIT stepped up its commitment to Native Americans in 2005 by the hiring of Jason Younker to launch a Native Americans studies program.

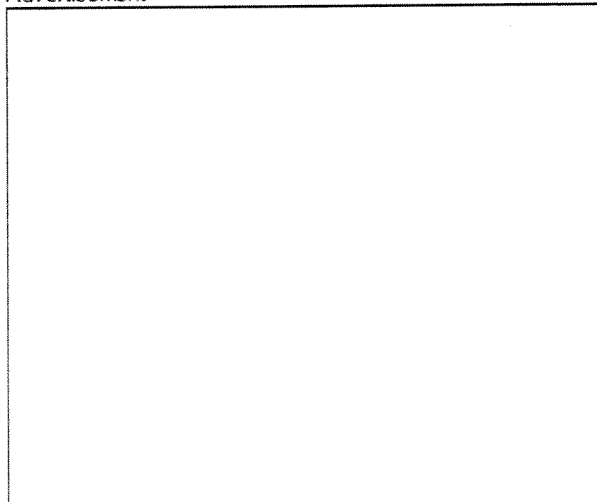
But he has put the focus on more support for Native American students at RIT.

“I explained that Native Americans don't need to learn about their own history,” said Younker, who is now an associate professor of anthropology.

Younker attributes RIT's high graduation rate for Native Americans to the support network and connections developed for them.

RIT's Future Stewards Program provides

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services for Native American students and organizes activities — including the recruitment of students on or near upstate reservations, while the Native American Science and Technology concentration offers courses ranging from economics of Native America to cultural resources management and historic preservation.

The college also has chapters of the Native American Student Association and American Indian Science and Engineering Society.

With a \$25,000 grant, RIT has helped launch Ganondagan's Iroquois White Corn Project, which — in a farmhouse at the western edge of Ganondagan — is reviving a crop that is low in sugar and rich in Native American tradition.

"What all of us are trying to do is work more closely with Native communities," said RIT research professor Roger Dube, who is Native American.

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