

Cultural Change and Continuity through Internships and
Intergenerational Learning
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Abstract

Most people, including Alaska Natives, don't recognize that they belong to a culture. People sometimes overlook culture as just everyday life. In this session the presenter will describe several internship programs offered at the Alaska Native Heritage Center that help participants recognize the components of their cultures.

Introduction

I was asked in a job interview at the Alaska Native Heritage Center, "What Native things have you done?" The first thought that came to me was, what are "Native things"? My idea of a "Native" came from movies of John Wayne, cowboys and Indians. I didn't ride a horse or wear feathers in my hair. We didn't live in a sod house underground. My family lived in a frame house with electricity and a telephone. We had aluminum skiffs, not seal skin kayaks. We did have smoked and dried salmon but my thought was, "Doesn't everyone live like that?" I spent a great deal of time thinking of an answer but I couldn't give of a single example of Native things in my life. I told the interviewers, "I have done nothing Native," even though I was born in Kodiak and visited my mother's village of Port Lions every summer.

I wasn't hired by the Alaska Native Heritage Center but I still wanted to learn more about my Native heritage. Becoming a volunteer at the Center helped me see the culture I was blind to. Even though I grew up in a modern environment I finally realized I had been learning, living, and perpetuating my Sugpiaq culture all my life. Growing up in Oak Harbor, Washington, my parents instilled in me all the traditional values of our culture and of our family. I thought about the question I was asked during my interview at the Heritage Center – what Native things have you done - and I realized my initial answer was wrong. I was taught about my ancestors; I picked berries and fished with my family; I heard my Native language. When you are in a culture sometimes you don't realize you are in a culture.

Many of the students accepted into the Alaska Native Heritage Center's internship programs come from the same urban setting I grew up in. Coming from an urban setting can make it hard for new interns to believe they are bearers of culture. Some believe that because of their separation from the village lifestyle they are no longer Native. A mistake I made in not recognizing the fact that I had grown up Native in an urban setting was the fact that most of the lessons taught to me were indirect, like the lessons and morals imbedded in the stories from your parents grandparents, and mentors. There is still a certain amount of indirect teaching in Alaska Native Heritage Center's intern programs, but more emphasis is placed on direct instruction.

This is partly in recognition of the fact that many of our young interns have become accustomed to the direct methods through years of public schooling.

From the time you are born to the time you become an adult, information is taken in by watching, listening and doing. As you age another duty is added to the list, “teaching”. Furthermore, tradition bearers and elders from the various cultures of Alaska teach during our summer season and high school program, supplementing the knowledge of the staff.

1. Alaska Native Heritage Center High School Program

The Alaska Native Heritage Center High School Program is a place where Anchorage area Alaska Native and Native American youth celebrate their culture in guided after-school classes two hours a day, four days a week. The ANHC High School Program uses culturally relevant curriculum to stimulate intergenerational learning in the Alaska Native community. Our courses go beyond cultural enrichment; Anchorage School District elective credits are granted to every student who attends at least 120 hours per semester. The credit can be accumulated throughout the years as the students attend our five classes.

Program classes are:

- a) **Alaska Native Dance:** Students in the dance class have the opportunity to learn traditional and contemporary methods of drum dancing from all the major culture groups of Alaska. Students may even have the opportunity to perform with the well-respected and highly professional Alaska Native Heritage Center Dancers.
- b) **Communication through Technology:** Students in the Technology Class learn the theories and applications of print media and state-of-the-art video production. Guest instructors teach throughout the year and field trips are taken. Students become familiar with intermediate and advanced computer operations, digital video production and various software applications. Students are required to understand basic computer operations as well as basic reading and writing.
- c) **Alaska Native Arts Program:** In its seventh year, the art class has become a favorite for students in the High School Program. Students in this class focus on practicing traditional Native art, while exploring contemporary methods. Students become inspired by Alaska Native artists who visit the art class and share art forms from their Native cultures. Students also take home their completed projects.
- d) **Native Games:** Students in the Native Games Class learn traditional Native Games that have been done for thousands of years, and are continued today. These games test skills in balance, strength, endurance, stamina, endurance to pain, and concentration. Students participate, and compete in the Anchorage Native Youth Olympic Preliminaries, and those who make it to the state level will compete and represent Anchorage, or

their respected area or region. In the class physical fitness and stretching is taught to prevent injury. Respect and sportsmanship are experiences students will receive during their time in class. Students may have the opportunity to demonstrate with the Alaska Native Heritage Center Native Games performers during the summer, and also compete at the World Eskimo Indian Olympics.

- e) **Leadership:** All students are involved in leadership training throughout the school year. Community leaders from all walks of life and of all ethnicities talk to the students about their journeys to leadership. Our goal is to show students that they are all leaders, affecting the lives of their younger siblings and, later, their children.

Each class is taught by an Alaska Native educator and is structured to respect both traditional and contemporary models of learning. Our teaching staff also coordinates guest instructors and Master Artists to come into the classroom to share their knowledge, skills and abilities. The program is free and includes (Anchorage) school shuttle pick-up and student door-to-door home drop-off. The High School Program runs during the school year Tuesdays through Fridays.

The more information the students take in, the more responsibility they have to “pass it on”. Once our students have completed our after school high school program they may become summer staff interns and have the opportunity to pass their knowledge on the thousands of visitors.

2. **Summer Internship Program**

The Alaska Native Heritage Center’s core purpose is cultivating the cultural wealth of Alaska’s indigenous people for future generations through intergenerational learning opportunities for Native youth, students, and the general public in Anchorage. Through our internship program, made possible through a federal grant (ECHO – Education through Cultural and Historical Organizations) from the US Department of Education, No Child Left Behind Legislation, Native youth learn vital life and professional skills while they work at the Center. ECHO funding has provided job training and professional development opportunities to 255 Alaska Native interns and 30 full time employees. Each summer these interns educate over 110,000 visitors, touching the lives of people from throughout the world.

After they have completed their initial two week intensive training, the interns are employed May through September to deliver cultural education to the Center's visitors on indigenous Alaska arts, dance, games and cultural history.

The intern’s training doesn’t stop at the end of the first two weeks. Before the Heritage Center opened, Elders and cultural advisors spent uncounted hours detailing the information they wanted our interns to share with visitors. That information forms the basis of our Cultural Competency list. A cultural competency is a skill or

area of knowledge that helps a person realize his or her potential as an Alaska Native in the 21st century.

We continue to add to that list whenever an Elder comes to the Center work with our staff on a specific skill. For instance, we are currently putting together a fish processing cultural competency.

I am now the Cultural Programs Manager at the Alaska Native Heritage Center. I am now one of the people in charge of hiring new interns. One individual named Daniel Hertzler came into an interview and immediately proclaimed, "I know nothing about my Native Culture". This statement caused several of the other interviewers to be hesitant to hire Daniel. I then reminded them of my story and insisted we hire him. We just needed to point out the information he didn't realize he already possessed and continue to feed him new information about his Native culture. Daniel has worked for the Alaska Native Heritage Center for five years receiving employee of the month numerous times and has become an emerging tradition bearer. He has also joined a Native dance group to further supplement what he has learned as an intern.

Conclusion

Because the Internship Program prepares Alaska Natives to be cultural interpreters, it provides for the education of indigenous Alaskans as well as non-Native Center visitors. Knowing one's culture helps our interns recognize and appreciate the differences in various cultures. It also adds to the Alaska Native youth's growing pride in their indigenous culture.

And as for myself, I no longer question whether I'm Sugpiaq. I know I am. I am the founder and leader of a dance group, Imamsuat. I have been asked to teach children and adolescents back in my hometown at summer culture camps. In fact, I am now at that second stage in life, when it is my duty to teach and pass on what I have learned. But that doesn't mean I have stopped learning – in fact, my Sugpiaq name says it all: Elisngacimek means "The one who is always learning." That's what it's all about at the Alaska Native Heritage Center.