A Brief History of Northland College Commitments to the Ojibwe

Nathaniel Dexter notes in his landmark book*, Northland College: A History*, that the college was "named not for a denomination or a man but for a region it was destined to serve." (Dexter, 4) Observe Dexter's emphasis on the geographic significance and the desire to serve, marking the deep sense of purpose that animates Northland's entire history. Northland College is an institution of the north, established in the heart of Indian country – the home of the Ojibwe nations and their people. From the very beginning the college claimed a commitment to serving all the people of the region, particularly the Native American and immigrant populations for whom the fruits of education often went wanting.

To tell that story one must go back in the early days of the Wisconsin territory and the arrival of Protestant missionaries and westward settlers. The Reverend Leonard Wheeler and his recent bride, Harriet (nee Wood), arrived on Madeline Island on August 1, 1841 to take up the pastoral office at the pioneer missionary Congregational church at La Pointe. The church served the small but growing village and the Native people of the island, and was referred to as the "Chippewa Mission". The little church was indeed sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for *Foreign Missions*! (This Board, serving the Congregational churches of New England was the very same organization that sponsored the establishment of the historic African American colleges in the South.) The Wheelers took to their work with enthusiasm and boundless energy. Dexter notes:

> The Wheelers administered in every possible way in the wigwams of their parish. Thus, on the one hand, they lived in a world of fur traders, primitive Indians, and a Neolithic way of life, but they also lived in a world coming to be – a world of churches, schools, surveyors, mining . . . sawmills, cities and railroads. (Dexter 7-8)

The Wheelers also understood that the Native people were in the midst of a cataclysmic change in their traditional way of life. They developed a deep love and commitment to the Ojibwe members of their congregation and to those who declined conversion to Christianity. Both populations came to love and respect the Wheeler (particularly Harriet, according to numerous oral histories).

In 1845 the Wheelers negotiated a move for the mission to an area just east of what would become Ashland, to an area he designated as "the garden", or Odanah in the Ojibwe. He moved the mission and his family, including his young son Edward. Edward's childhood friends and school classmates thus included primarily Ojibwe children. The Wheeler family members were bi-lingual, fluent in the language and the customs of the Native population of the region, and advocates for the integrity of Indian communities. Indeed, the elder Wheeler helped prevent the westward removal of the Lake Superior Ojibwe and set the Wisconsin boundaries of the Bad River Reservation before the Treaty of 1854 to prevent what had happened to nearly all of the eastern tribes – forced removal.

This early history helps us understand the deep roots of trust and commitment at the very foundation of the Congregational members who also became the founders of what was to become Northland College. Thus, when Edwin Ellis and other Congregational leaders came together in 1891 to establish an academy to serve the north, they specifically identified the children of immigrants, young women, and the native people of the region as principle beneficiaries of this new academy (Declaration of Principles, Board of Incorporation, North Wisconsin Academy, August 6, 1891). The Board elected none other than Edward Wheeler as the first and founding President of the Academy. Wheeler brought his family's long history and his own childhood friendships and experiences to that office, and remained committed to offering the benefits of higher education to Native people as well as more traditional academy candidates. That legacy remains an essential part of the purpose and enduring mission of the college from those founding days.

The college has known other significant moments in its long and varied relationship to the tribes of northern Wisconsin. In the spring of 1927 a "sacred stone", the tribal "Spirit Stone" of the Midewiwin Grand Medicine Lodge of the Bad River Band, was entrusted to Northland College, because, "they will understand and respect" our ways and sacred tradition (Dexter, 145). Dr. Joseph Brownell, the longest serving President in the college's history, was so beloved and trusted by the tribes of the region that he was formally adopted as a son of the Bad River Band of Ojibwe in 1932. (Edward Wheeler had also been adopted into the tribe much earlier). This honor stands as a rare testament to the depth of the relationship between the region's Ojibwe people and the college's historic mission. Frank Smart of the Bad River band served as one of the first Northland College Alumni Association presidents, and became a strong advocate for the college and for native student enrollment at the college.

The college developed new expressions of the commitment to native student education during the last half-century. The Native American Studies program was established in 1972 with a grant from the United Church of Christ (the successor body to the Congregational Church of the founders). And, by 1973, 25 native students were enrolled at the college, in part through the recruiting efforts of the program director, Sid Lewis (*The Highway*, Fall 1973). Lewis envisioned a program where "Native Americans teach Native American Studies" and where the college would recruit more native students and provide outreach programs to the tribes (*The Highway*, Fall 1973). That vision echoes to our current efforts through the Indigenous Cultures Center at the college.

Joe Rose, a son of the college (1958) and tribal leader from Bad River, became the program's second director, serving from 1974 to 2011. Rose founded that Northland College Pow-Wow in 1975, the first college-based Pow-Wow and leader in the cultural restoration movements nationally. Northland celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Spring Pow-Wow this past years with record-setting attendance, drums and dancers. Rose also deepened the links between academics and NAS, helping establish the Natural Resources program at the college and linking Native Studies to Outdoor Education. Rose has also been instrumental in establishing a native cultural presence, at Northland College, developing a Native American Museum on campus and through traditional ritual leadership *(e.g.*, Pipe Ceremony) in partnership with the college's Campus Ministry and Chaplaincy programs. This inter-faith partnership stands as a unique expression of inter-faith exploration and understanding.

This college continues to explore new ways to strengthen its historic commitments to the region's tribes and to Native Americans in higher education. Katrina Werchouski serves as the second director of the Indigenous Culture Center, with ambitious plans for greater outreach to the region's tribes and tribal youth. The Native American Studies Program now boasts a full major course of study, and the program celebrates the intellectual gifts of professors Dr. Karissa White and Dr. Elizabeth Wabindato, with additional academic support from Associate Professor Clayton Russell. President Miller has established a strong regional consultation with the tribes and works closely with tribal leaders (including several Tribal Chairmen who are Northland alumni) and with Katrina Werchouski and the Indigenous Culture Center. Through these efforts the college celebrates its unique and rich heritage, honors its historic mission moving well into a new century, and expresses its commitment to cultural diversity in way fitting to the geographic identity and heart of service that marks the college's enduring legacy.

David W. Saetre. June 2015

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-141, 107 Stat. 1488 (November 16, 1993), (also known as RFRA), is a 1993 United States federal law that "ensures that interests in religious freedom are protected." The bill was introduced by Congressman Chuck Schumer (D-NY) on March 11, 1993. A companion bill was introduced in the Senate by Ted Kennedy (D-MA) the same day. A unanimous U.S. House and a nearly unanimous U.S. Senate—three senators voted against passage—passed the bill, and President Bill Clinton signed it into law.

The RFRA was held unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court, as applied to the states in the *City of Boerne v. Flores* decision in 1997, which ruled that the RFRA is not a proper exercise of Congress's enforcement power. However, it continues to be applied to the federal government—for instance, in *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao do Vegetal*—because Congress has broad authority to carve out exemptions from federal laws and regulations that it itself has authorized. In response *to City of Boerne v. Flores* and other related RFR issues, twenty individual states have passed State Religious Freedom Restoration Acts that apply to state governments and local municipalities.

Upward Bound

Two Directors: Joe and John Wilmar

At one time the Upward Bound program employed three full time staff in addition to the Director, including program coordinators and Native American education specialists (Marge Hjeimeliski).

Associate Director, NAS: Connie Burditt (who also served as Upward Bound staff until the end of the Upward Bound program).

Native American Studies program and Native student recruiting: at one time NAS included a Native American student recruiter who reported directly to the Director of NAS. (Essie Leoso) This position was transferred over to Admissions with mixed results and was eventually discontinued under a later admissions regimen.