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## **An Indigenous Perspective on Women Leadership:**

### **An Example for Higher Education**

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Fielding Graduate University

An Indigenous Perspective on Women Leadership:

An Example for Higher Education

Fielding Graduate University, founded in 1974, offers distributed graduate education and research programs in three social science areas: psychology, human and organizational development, and educational leadership. All three schools affirm a commitment to social change and social justice. The Educational Leadership and Change (ELC) doctoral program was developed in 1996 as a way to influence educational reform and to make doctoral education accessible to working adults, especially those from underserved communities. During its development, the program struggled and faltered as it tried to establish its identity and work toward its goals. After an abrupt change in leadership, two women emerged to form a co-dean leadership team: Susan Tiara, Ph.D. and Judy Witt, Ph.D. Looking for a model that emphasized relationships and a more global outlook, they adopted Total Transformational Management Process (Mink, Esterhuysen, Mink, & Owen, 1993) as the conceptual framework for ELC's governance. Based on action research processes, TTMP utilizes an inclusive model for change that emphasizes the system, "paying special attention to the human side" (p. 11). TTMP was instrumental in developing ELC's way of simultaneously working at the individual, group, and organizational levels and in seeing participatory action research (Park, 1992, 1993) as "transformation concomitant with intense learning" (Mink, et al., 1993, p. 11). Considering the complexity of Fielding's dispersed learning environment, such a transformational priority in leadership, communication, and decision-making became a critical priority for both Fielding and ELC.

Although it is interesting to note that in 2003 Fielding ranked number one (right alongside Oklahoma State University) in graduating more American Indian doctorates than any university in the United States ("Top 100 degree producers," 2003, p.73), neither indigenous people nor indigenous philosophy per se were involved in ELC's early development. However, the natural power and vision of the "feminine principle of leadership" that has long been recognized and honored by indigenous people seems to inform ELC's work. Armstrong defines this principle as being

...essential to our vision of healthy equality-seeking organizations...sharing power, authority and decision-making...(where) leaders work from a vision of shared power, providing opportunities for all members to develop and use their leadership skills. (2005, p.1)

For thousands of years indigenous people have understood this vital role of women in guiding and maintaining healthy societies and egalitarian relationships. Women have largely carried forth the values of their cultures. Their creative and courageous ability to adapt to new conditions continues to renew community traditions throughout tribal life (Medicine & Albers, 1983). Unfortunately, this role of women has largely been ignored in most social, historical, or anthropological studies of Native America. Barbara Alice Mann, a Seneca scholar and author, points out this fact in her chapter for *Unlearning the Language of Conquest* entitled, "Where Are Your Women? Missing in Action:"

In the twenty-first century, it is incumbent upon (especially Native American) scholars to rectify the western obliteration of women from the record, surely the most unconscionable of the many misrepresentations that have been foisted upon Native America by Euro-America. (in press)

Using Dr. Mann's chapter in part to help identify eight traditional leadership skills/concepts used by indigenous women, this article attempts to show how similar female leadership principles are employed in ELC. It is important to note that ELC has not attained all of its goals, but is a work in progress. Nonetheless, both its successes and its goals are operational models for what can be and for how institutions can return to the wisdom embedded in the indigenous worldview.

### Engaging Freedom

For indigenous people, freedom and justice refer to a way of life rather than to a set of laws. American Indian women were confident, self-directed, and truly free in ways that might still seem ambitious in many contemporary western societies. In 1632 the Dominican missionary, Gabriel Sagard, complained about the amount of freedom Wyandott women enjoyed and about how they, as their own bosses, used this time to feast, party, and gamble (Sagard, 1939). ELC's leadership shares this commitment to freedom. Although sometimes frustrating to those in need of more structure and specificity, ELC's administration and faculty governance teams have intentionally avoided policies, rules, and procedures when they risked suppressing individual faculty or student voices. Like traditional First Nations' women, the ELC community illuminates strong, independent, nurturing voices that demand to be heard. When issues emerge, whether from students, alumni, faculty, or staff, space is made on agendas and forums to hear those voices and deal with the issues they raise.

### Accepting and Handling Political Power with Integrity

Another principle of leadership practiced by indigenous women is that issues are more important than individuals when attempting to resolve interpersonal conflicts. This kind of understanding may explain why most indigenous cultures were matrilineal and why "all the real authority" resided in the women (Parker, 1916, p. 55). Patriarchal systems of domination tend to focus more on power struggles between

individuals. This is why European men set out to change things, using "pen-and-ink witchcraft" along the way to erase the truth (Mann, in press).

Indigenous women used their authority in ways that gave balance to male and female energies, to human and non-human life forms, and to work and play activities. Even today indigenous women activists around the world engage the most crucial issues of our time without compromising the vision of balancing vital relationships. Political power was never self-serving.

This idea of handling political power with integrity and humility is exemplified by Fielding University's president, Judith Kuipers; the Provost, Anna DiStefano; and ELC's current Dean, Judy Witt. From the small things, like the President jitterbugging and salsa dancing at a party for new graduates, the Provost doing a preposterous magic act at National Session talent show, or the Dean admitting she had forgot to put the gold tassel on her cap when presenting at the graduation ceremony, to more significant examples of down-to-earth transparency, honesty, and caring for others, all three women use their political power with the kind of genuine humility that keeps the focus on the community rather than on personal gain.

The University's strategic plan for 2003-2006 identified five priorities: fundraising, strategic growth, diversity, operational processes/knowledge management, and facilities. The President worked with her leadership team to identify "champions" to spearhead the work in each priority and become accountable for progress within it. The Provost did not shirk responsibility, but stepped forward boldly to become the Diversity Priority Champion. Certainly, other areas would have held less controversy, less challenge, and certainly less work. Yet, she did what is best for the university first and without hesitation.

### Judicial Wisdom

When indigenous "leaders" evaluate important issues, they listen to everyone's voice before offering advice or recommending action. In so doing, they emphasize responsibility over rights. The woman's ability to effectively negotiate complex social issues was proven for tens of thousands of years in indigenous communities. Referring to Haudenosaunee councils, Barbara Mann states,

Judicial affairs so entirely belonged to women that any woodlands man who wished to become a jurist or a negotiator had first to have been "made a woman" in order to be qualified for the job. Rendering judgments and untangling affairs was likened to pounding out the corn, reducing the hard kernel of a dispute to powder, easily blown away by the breath of reason. Consequently, all judges, male or female, carried corn-pounders and wore skirts. (Mann, in press)

Although the faculty, administrators, and students that sit on the ELC governance committees at Fielding are not required to wear skirts or carry symbolic corn-pounders, the feminine principle tends to dominate judicial decisions. Decisions relating to such issues as faculty workload or student curriculum come from the grass roots up and employ every opportunity for students, faculty, staff, and administrators to engage the topic. When university-wide decisions must be made, faculty, student, and often alumni/ae members from each of the three colleges contribute to the dialogue, as occurred when Fielding Graduate Institute became "University," and as is currently happening with questions pertaining to professional titles, budget priorities, strategic directions, program growth, etc.

### Authentic Honoring of Alternative Gender Orientations

Early Europeans did not understand distinctions between their sex-role stereotypes and the First Nation's gendering of tasks. They often referred to councilmen, especially those wearing skirts, with derogatory sexual terms. Yet, in indigenous cultures, homosexual orientations were and are respected, with

no confusion regarding work relating to such orientations (Lang, 1998).

In Fielding's ELC, gay and lesbian faculty and students appear comfortably out of the closet. Whether bringing beloved partners to social engagements or graduation ceremonies, or speaking with passion to sexual orientation issues, all participants in the ELC community seem to regard sexual orientation in ways that match the respectful accord practiced by indigenous people.

### Spiritual Awareness

Indigenous spirituality is about a sacred realization that everything is related and that there is great significance in the "other" (Jacobs, 2002). Spirituality is essential and allows for emphasis on process and a commitment to restoring harmony. It understands the humanness of cognitive dissonance so that it is not rationalized or denied, but rather it is resolved through a respectful talking out process. It honored the role of women in creating and maintaining harmony. Again, this feminine aspect of spirituality has been attacked by the dominating culture, beginning with the excising of women from creation traditions who, throughout the American continent, featured females as the progenitrices of creation (Hewitt, 1928, p. 468; Mann, in press).

ELC openness to integrating spirituality into its program manifests itself in numerous ways. In curriculum, ELC is working on a certification program called "Spirituality in Education" where students study the numerous spiritual traditions of the world. In its coursework, many students incorporate spiritual concepts in either their *in-depth* or their *applied* work. Recently, as a result of student activism and faculty receptivity, a new required course on "Structural Inequality" was established. Organizationally, the awareness of connectedness is a conscious part of the day to day operations. Still lacking in ELC is a broader engagement with environmental issues, although it is at least recognized as a priority. Indigenous terminologies used for nature have always been associated with a mother or a woman.

### Emphasis on Peacemaking and Social Justice

Transformative theory rather than retributive, hierarchical, adversarial, punitive, or codified assumptions guide action in traditional Native cultures, and once again women have led the way throughout indigenous history. For example, the founding of the Iroquois League was guided by a woman known as "the Peace Queen." Without her involvement, the great peace movement that led to this council (and to the U.S. constitution) would not have occurred. She worked tirelessly to help create "The Great Law of Peace," and she provided the ultimate solution to difficult problems blocking ratification of the new Constitution (Mann & Fields, 1997, p. 105-163). Today, indigenous women worldwide are taking on leadership roles in their communities to assert peace.

As mentioned above, the ELC management structure was based on transformative models. Its vision as well as the larger university's vision clearly emphasizes social justice. The most revealing evidence, however, is found in the titles of ELC student coursework papers and dissertations. Examples include: *Awakened Belonging: Utilizing Traditional Stories to Enhance Self-Perception of Diné Children* (Begay, 2002); *Emancipatory Learning: A Study of Teachers' Perspective Shifts Regarding Children of Battered Women* (McCarthy, 1999); *The Mexican American Leaders' Voice: Reclaiming a Cultural Consciousness* (Bush, 2004); *Cultural Literacy vs. Cultural Proficiency: A Study of the Effects of Gender and Ethnic Biases on Euro-American Women and People of Color from Marginalized Ethnic Groups* (Davis, 2005); *The Criminalization of Individuals Suffering from Symptoms of Mental Illness: An Exploratory Study* (Griffin, 2001); *Violentology: Positive Pedagogy to Create a Peaceful Resolution to Violence in Schools through a Prescribed Course of Study* (Harris, 1999); *Preserving a Culture: Practicity the Navajo Principles of Hozho Doo K'e* (Haskie, 2001), and *Tales from Between the Cracks: The Quest for Academic Success Following Grade Retention Among African American Male Students* (Lee, 2004). These represent just a few examples.



Research relating to peace, equity, and transformational education pervades student work.

### Effective Use of Economic Power

Lionel Robbins offered a popular definition for economics as a "science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means that have alternative uses" (quoted in Stigler, 1984, p. 301). Before their oppression, indigenous worldviews led to economic decisions that emphasized deep appreciation for resource scarcity, yet without the competitive associations regarding use of those resources. Authoritarian systems were not needed to assure wise and equitable use of resources. Such non-competitive philosophies came from the feminine understanding of the world. They understood accountability in terms of restoring healthy relationships. As a result, they guided barter and minimized warfare between tribes for thousands of years.

Because Fielding is a tuition driven institution, priority setting that struggles with the push-pull of market versus values is a constant challenge for students, faculty, and administration. The balancing act of keeping tuition affordable and continuing to offer the highest quality education program stretches Fielding's imagination and creativity every budget cycle.

### Creativity

Leadership at ELC is always ready for creative thinking that supports the nurturing model. The efforts correspond to how indigenous women around the world manage to cultivate healthful foods, even developing natural pesticides and fertilizers, in spite of being denied land ownership in many countries. In her acceptance speech for the Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life, Marta Benavides emphasized this important creative contribution:

It is women, especially indigenous women, who maintain traditional knowledge for food, and medicinal plants, as well as traditional methods to preserve seeds, for planting, for natural control of insects and plagues. They have safeguarded biodiversity. Without doubt, rural women's work and creativity, make a great contribution to the family's economy, thus to the Gross Domestic Product, to food security, to the caring of biodiversity, to the quality of life of rural families and communities and understood conservation. (Benevides, 2003, p. 74)

Within ELC, the governance structure has evolved based on an "issues up" process. An example was the creation of the Equity Council. Several students came to the Dean after becoming frustrated at a face-to-face session and observing students far into the program who did not demonstrate a basic understanding of issues of structural inequities, a cornerstone of the competencies and curriculum. Instead of suggesting a quick fix, taking the issues on herself, or diverting them to an existing governance team, the Dean challenged the group of students to begin exploring the issues together and created the space and support for them to join with faculty volunteers to do just that. Within two years, a new governance team was formed and approved and the faculty members have added the course, *Structural Inequality and Diversity*, to core requirements of the program.

### Concluding Thoughts

This article has emphasized the employment of feminist and indigenous principles for leadership in higher education. At Fielding, the leadership is genuinely working toward applying these principles to increase educational accessibility and quality at the graduate level. Higher education today is struggling to find the leadership needed to move into this new century (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gunport, 1999; Van Patten, 1990). ELC's leadership is evolving to be a timely example of efforts to bring forth a new way of doing leadership that is feminine, synergistic, and sustainable in ways that bring to mind the ancient wisdom of our

indigenous ancestors, whose ideas about leadership may be essential for future health and survival (Four Arrows, in press).

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