# Supporting the Career Aspirations of American Indian Youth

*by Annette E. Alliman-Brissett and Sherri L. Turner*

We all have the freedom to dream—about life and career goals, wishes for our children's future, or personal aspirations. In American Indian culture, dreams are a valued part of daily life and often symbolize hope. Many American Indian youth have great dreams about graduating from high school, attending college, and obtaining a personally valued and satisfying career, but many face the stark realities of not finishing high school or obtaining the job they want. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 1997 *Annual Demographic Survey,* dropout rates among American Indian young people are greater than 50% in some places in the country. In addition, the rate of unemployment and underemployment among American Indians still far exceeds that of the majority population, despite affirmative action and other parity-seeking policies. A 1997 report by the Bureau of Indian Affairs titled *Indian Labor Force Report: Portrait 1997* concludes that adult American Indians are overrepresented in primarily unskilled occupations, and the 1990 U.S. Census found that unemployment rates ranged from 25% to 80% on all American Indian reservations and among the 25 largest tribes in the nation.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 4.1 million American Indian people live in the United States, and more than 50,000 live in Minnesota. Approximately half of the American Indians in Minnesota live in urban areas. Census trends indicate an influx of American Indians migrating to large urban areas. These trends highlight a critical need to provide career planning and development interventions that are culturally relevant and address the unique career challenges of American Indian young people. These challenges include moving from a rural reservation residence to an urban setting, competing for jobs in which values and social customs might be different than one's own, constructing relationships with ethnically different people, and searching for educational and occupational opportunities that are available in larger metropolitan areas.

Career education is one way to help young people set career goals, make plans to reach those goals, and overcome career barriers early in life. However, few tested career education programs are designed to meet the specific career development needs of American Indian young people. To help fill this gap, we developed a career education curriculum called "Two Feathers: A Career Education Curriculum for American Indian Adolescents," which is described in this article. Our efforts were supported by a New Initiative grant from CURA, and by a grant from the College of Education and


Photo courtesy of Sherri L. Turner

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## The Two Feathers Curriculum

The Two Feathers curriculum was developed in consultation with American Indian parents, educators, and community leaders. Upon completion, we believed that we had a culturally rich educational tool. The curriculum features well-researched cooperative learning activities that promote social skill building, decision making, visual and artistic expression, problem solving, and goal setting. It also emphasizes the importance of family and community support throughout the career decision-making process, and helps American Indian youth become more proactive in identifying personal and social barriers that may hinder them from pursuing their career goals. The curriculum is infused with valuable career and life skill building exercises that promote tribal wisdom and traditions, such as group work and storytelling as a medium for instruction and information sharing.

The Two Feathers curriculum consists of the following:

- exploration of a wide range of jobs that young people may not have considered previously;
- exploration of career interests, with particular attention paid to exploring career interests that are more nontraditional for American Indian people;
- exploration of barriers that young people could encounter while pursuing their educations and careers (e.g., poverty, pregnancy, feeling poorly prepared academically);
- identification of individuals in the young people's environment—such as parents and other extended family members, teachers, peers, school counselors, and members of the American Indian community—who can support their career aspirations;
- study of relationships between educational opportunities and career possibilities; and
- instruction and practice in decision making and goal setting.

The Two Feathers curriculum is unique in that cultural traditions and beliefs drawn from a number of American Indian tribes are embedded in the curriculum. For example, the curriculum emphasizes honoring elders and seeking their opinions when making decisions, and teaches career exploration and goal-setting strategies through story telling. The curriculum is also unique in that American Indian teachers, school administrators, and community members serve as role models and instructors whenever possible.

## Study Methodology

The curriculum was presented twice a week for approximately 30 minutes per session, for a total of 10 weeks. In all, 53 American Indian young people participated in the Two Feathers lessons. They came from several different tribes, but primarily identified themselves as Ojibwe, Dakota, and Chippewa.

To measure the effects of this intervention, three pre/post survey instruments were used: *Mapping Vocational Challenges,*[1] the *Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Survey,*[2] and the *Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale*.[3] These instruments measure career interests, the valuing of various careers, perceptions of social supports pursuant to obtaining various careers, and expectations that specific careers can be attained, as well as career exploration confidence, confidence in knowledge of self and others, and educational and career decision making. *Mapping Vocational Challenges* is a career assessment inventory that helps young people explore their interests, confidence, perceived parent support, and valuing of careers and career-related activities. The other two instruments are paper and pencil surveys that were developed for use with adolescents. Each of these three instruments was administered during the first week and the last week of the intervention. We then compared scores gathered before and subsequent to participation in the Two Feathers curriculum.[4]

## Findings

Prior to their participation in the Two Feathers curriculum, many of the American Indian youth had limited career exposure but heightened hopes and dreams about their future. Their initial career interests ranged from more easily obtainable careers (becoming a hair stylist) to those that were harder to obtain (becoming an actor or a player in the National Basketball Association). By the end of their lessons, participants had considered a broad spectrum of career interests and opportunities, had increased their self-confidence and expectations related to a number of different careers, and had demonstrated heightened awareness of diverse career prospects and perceptions of cultural and social support. They also gained valuable problem-solving and decision-making skills that assisted many of them to develop backup plans for secondary career interests in the face of barriers or obstacles to their first career choice.

Specifically, after one semester of career development education using the Two Feathers curriculum, American Indian youth did not express greater interests in pursuing careers typically requiring a high school diploma compared to their responses during the first week of curriculum presentation. However, they did express greater interests in pursuing careers typically requiring a bachelor or graduate degree such as veterinarian, astronomer, attorney, speech pathologist, fiber optics technician, medical illustrator, athletic coach, broadcast journalist, agricultural scientist, and screen play writer (Table 1). In addition, they expressed greater valuing of library science careers, veterinary science careers, astronomy careers, coaching careers, and writing careers (Table 2); and participants perceived greater social support for careers such as medical illustrating, coaching, and writing (Table 3).

Participants also expressed greater confidence in knowing how to explore careers in which they were interested, knowing how to select extracurricular activities that would help them meet their interests and future goals, knowing how to engage in problem solving related to educational and career goals, and deciding what kind of education they would need to achieve their career goals (Table 4). Participants expected the same number of challenges to their career development as they had before completing the Two Feathers curriculum, but they expected fewer difficulties in overcoming those challenges.

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[1] R.T. Lapan and S.L. Turner (1999). *Mapping Vocational Challenges*. Software program. All rights reserved.

[2] N.C. Gysbers, K.D. Multon, R.T. Lapan, and L. Lukin (1992). *Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Survey*. Jefferson City, MO: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

[3] N.A. Fouad, P.L. Smith, and L. Enochs (1997). "Reliability and Validity Evidence for the Middle School Self-Efficacy Scale." *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development* 30 (1): 17–31.

[4] Pre-test and post-test scores were compared using Omnibus F and paired-samples t-tests.

**Table 1. Interest in Occupations Before (Pre-Test) and Subsequent to (Post-Test) Participation in the Two Feathers Curriculum**

| Occupation | Pre-test interest | | Post-test interest | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean* | SD† | Mean* | SD† |
| Veterinarian | 1.53 | 0.99 | 1.98 | 0.88 |
| Astronomer | 1.38 | 0.98 | 1.57 | 0.76 |
| Attorney | 1.75 | 1.13 | 2.34 | 0.68 |
| Speech pathologist | 1.30 | 0.85 | 1.89 | 0.84 |
| Fiber optics technician | 1.35 | 0.92 | 1.66 | 0.64 |
| Medical illustrator | 1.40 | 0.98 | 2.05 | 0.68 |
| Athletic coach | 1.50 | 1.01 | 2.23 | 0.68 |
| Broadcast journalist | 1.35 | 0.86 | 1.82 | 0.62 |
| Agricultural scientist | 1.38 | 0.93 | 2.05 | 0.65 |
| Screenplay writer | 1.45 | 0.93 | 2.05 | 0.71 |

Note: $F = 11.64$; $p < 0.05$.

*Participants were asked to rate occupations on a three-point Likert scale, where 1 = low interest and 3 = high interest.

†SD = standard deviation, a statistical measure of the spread of scores around the mean of the sample.

**Table 2. Valuing of Occupations Before (Pre-Test) and Subsequent to (Post-Test) Participation in the Two Feathers Curriculum**

| Occupation | Pre-test valuing | | Post-test valuing | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean* | SD† | Mean* | SD† |
| Library science careers | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.08 | 0.27 |
| Astronomy careers | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.08 | 0.27 |
| Veterinary science careers | 0.09 | 0.16 | 0.26 | 0.44 |
| Coaching careers | 0.11 | 0.31 | 0.33 | 0.48 |
| Writing careers | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.20 | 0.31 |

Note: $F$ range = 3.83 to 8.76; $p < 0.05$.

*Participants were asked to rate how they valued occupations on a dichotomous scale, where 0 = low value and 1 = high value.

†SD = standard deviation, a statistical measure of the spread of scores around the mean of the sample.

Finally, compared to their responses prior to completing the Two Feathers curriculum, American Indian young people expressed greater expectations that they would work in careers requiring a bachelor or graduate degree than in careers that typically required a high school or community college degree (Table 5). For example, they more often expressed expectations that they would be office managers than that they would be office workers, that they would be veterinarians than that they would be animal caretakers, that they would be nuclear engineers than that they would be engineering technicians, that they would be attorneys than that they would be paralegals, that they would be marketing managers than that they would be phone sales agents, and that they would be mechanical engineers than that they would be mechanics.

## Conclusion

In our experience, career education and development methods have limited application to the unique needs of American Indian young people, as well as limited sensitivity to American Indian cultural values, traditions, and beliefs. These methods have not brought about the educational or career development gains that educators of American Indian young people have hoped for. Based on our findings, we believe it is imperative that career education curriculum intended for use with American Indian youth incorporate the cultural values, cultural expressions, and cultural traditions of American Indian people.

By using career education interventions that are culturally focused, educators can help American Indian young people gain a greater understanding of and appreciation for their own culture and how it impacts their career plans and goals. Providing culturally based curricula can contribute to American Indian young people's positive expectations that they can overcome potential barriers that might limit their pursuit of high school diplomas and more advanced college degrees, and that can help them discover information about careers that will be in greater demand during the next 50 years, such as math- and science-based careers, or careers they might otherwise overlook, such as medical illustrating or writing.

**Table 3. Perceived Social Support Before (Pre-Test) and Subsequent to (Post-Test) Participation in the Two Feathers Curriculum**

| Occupation | Pre-test social support | | Post-test social support | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean* | SD† | Mean* | SD† |
| Medical illustrating | 0.09 | 0.28 | 0.13 | 0.34 |
| Coaching | 0.17 | 0.38 | 0.37 | 0.49 |
| Writing | 0.04 | 0.20 | 0.23 | 0.43 |

Note: $F$ range = 5.16 to 7.85; $p < 0.05$.

*Participants were asked to rate perceived social support on a dichotomous scale, where 0 = low social support and 1 = high social support.

†SD = standard deviation, a statistical measure of the spread of scores around the mean of the sample.

**Table 4. Confidence in Career-Related Activities Before (Pre-Test) and Subsequent to (Post-Test) Participation in the Two Feathers Curriculum**

| Occupation | Pre-test scores | | Post-test scores | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean* | SD† | Mean* | SD† |
| Explore careers | 4.80 | 1.32 | 5.86 | 1.25 |
| Extracurricular activities | 5.50 | 1.35 | 6.36 | 1.00 |
| Problem solving | 5.44 | 1.33 | 6.29 | 0.85 |
| Educational decisions | 5.80 | 1.40 | 6.50 | 0.67 |

Note: $F$ range = 4.09 to 5.52; $p < 0.05$.

*Participants were asked to rate confidence on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 = low confidence and 7 = high confidence.

†SD = standard deviation, a statistical measure of the spread of scores around the mean of the sample.

**Table 5. Expectations that Participants Would Work in Careers Requiring a Bachelor or Graduate Degree Rather than an Associate Degree Before (Pre-Test) and Subsequent to (Post Test) Participation in the Two Feathers Curriculum**

| Occupation* | Frequency Pre-test† | Frequency Post-test† |
|---|---|---|
| Office managers/Office workers | 31/22 | 36/17 |
| Veterinarians/Animal caretakers | 22/31 | 27/26 |
| Nuclear engineers/Technicians | 20/33 | 27/26 |
| Attorneys/Paralegals | 39/14 | 49/4 |
| Marketing managers/Sales agents | 31/22 | 40/13 |
| Mechanical engineers/Mechanics | 20/33 | 22/31 |

Note: $F = 11.64$; all scores are significant at $p < 0.05$.

*For each pair of occupations, participants were asked which career they expected they might work in. The first occupation listed in each pair typically requires a four-year bachelor degree or a graduate degree, whereas the second occupation listed typically requires a high school degree or a two-year associate degree.

†Data in columns 2 and 3 show the ratio of students choosing each of the paired professions listed in column 1.

For educators who wish to implement a culturally based career curriculum, we have some suggestions based on our collaboration with American Indian parents, educators, and community leaders.

1. Display pictures of American Indian adults engaging in various types of job activities.
2. Bring into the classroom American Indian adults who are working in various types of occupations so they can share their employment experiences, as well as how they prepared for and obtained the jobs they have.
3. Create service learning opportunities that emphasize culture as well as learning about the various kinds of jobs that are available.
4. Provide job shadowing opportunities with American Indian employers.
5. Find American Indian mentors who take a special interest in young people's career development.
6. Involve American Indian parents and extended families, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles.
7. Create opportunities to help American Indian youth who have dropped out of school to return to school for further education and training.
8. Whenever possible, find American Indian counselors and teachers who can provide either direct services for American Indian young people or who can consult with teachers and school administrators about the best ways to provide education and support for American Indian youth.
9. Integrate culturally based career curricula into regular classroom experiences to enhance diversity training for youth of all ethnicities and cultures.

A need exists for career development programs that focus on the specific needs of American Indian youth. We suggest that in today's culturally diverse and technologically driven society, it will become increasingly important for career counselors and educators to prepare young people from all ethnic groups to achieve their academic and occupational potential. Making the commitment to increase the effectiveness of career education curricula for American Indian young people can assist them to creatively and proactively manage the career challenges they may face, and place them in a more advantageous position to create satisfying,

productive, and self-fulfilling life structures across their life spans.

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Photo courtesy of Sherri L. Turner

***Effective career education curricula can provide American Indian young people with greater confidence to explore career options, help them manage career challenges, and place them in a more advantageous position to find productive and satisfying employment.***

# Project Funding Available from CURA

The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs supports community-based research projects through several different programs. If you are unsure which program listed below is most suitable for your project proposal, you can complete a general Community Program Application form at www.cura.umn.edu/application.html and we will route your request to the appropriate program.

■ The **Communiversity Program** funds quarter-time graduate student assistantships for one semester to help community-based nonprofit organizations or government agencies with a specific project. Priority is given to organizations that serve diverse constituncies. The application deadline for fall semester 2005 assistantships is July 11, 2005. For more information, visit www.cura.umn.edu/programs/communiversity.html, or contact Communiversity program manager Ed Drury at 612-625-6045 or drury001@umn.edu.

■ The **Community Assistantship Program (CAP)** matches community-based nonprofit organizations, citizen groups, and government agencies in Greater Minnesota with students who can provide research assistance. Eligible organizations define a research project, submit an application, and if accepted, are matched with a qualified student to carry out the research. The deadline for applications for fall semester 2005 projects is July 11, 2005. For more information, visit www.cura.umn.edu/programs/CAP/cap.html, or contact CAP coordinator Will Craig at 612-625-3321 or wcraig@umn.edu.

■ **Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR)** provides student research assistance to Minneapolis and St. Paul community organizations involved in neighborhood-based revitalization. Projects may include any issue relevant to a neighborhood's needs and interests, including planning, program development, or program evaluation. Priority is given to projects that support and involve residents of color. Applications from organizations collaborating on a project are encouraged. Applications are due July 11 for fall 2005 assistance. For more information, visit www.npcr.org or contact NPCR program director Kris Nelson at nelso193@umn.edu or 612-625-1020.

■ The **University Neighborhood Network (UNN)** links community organizations to course-based neighborhood projects that students carry out as part of course requirements. For more information about support for course-based projects, visit www.unn.umn.edu, or contact UNN coordinator Julie Bluhm at 612-625-5584 or unn@umn.edu.