


Celebrating CN Native cultures



With degree programs and a new department designation, OU has become a national center for the study of Indigenous peoples' complex past and evolving future.

By Katherine Parker



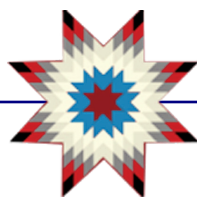
As nimble fingers drive needles down and back through patches of fabric, layers bind together creating a warm, comforting quilt. At the turn of the century, the U.S. government promoted quilting groups among Native American women as a means to sew their way to assimilation. Instead of forsaking their heritage, however, the women incorporated Native American symbols into their work, creating a new Native American art form. The star quilt, historically associated with the Sioux, has become a Pan-Indian symbol of cultural tradition, change and sovereignty, and now serves as the logo for the Native American Studies Department at the University of Oklahoma.

Just as Native American quilts are made with many different pieces by many different hands so, too, is the Native American Studies program diverse, vibrant and reflective of cultural change and growth. Native and non-Native students bring together different perspectives to learn about a complex past and living culture, says Native American Studies Department Chair Amanda Cobb-Greetham, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and former Chickasaw Nation tribal official.

"No other campus in the region has the resources that OU has for Native American Studies. We're poised to be the leading academic program in the country," says Cobb-Greetham. Growth in both curriculum and enrollment prove her case.

The department offers students a variety of options. Rance Weryackwe of the Comanche Nation is quickly gaining a passion for teaching; Stormie Perdash, who is Shoshone-Bannock, is involved in multiple campus organizations and hopes to compete for 2016 Miss Indian





Mason Drumm

Native American Studies major Kimberley DeJesus will complete her reign as Miss Indian OU in March. DeJesus, who is of Comanche, Otoe-Missouria, Pawnee, Ioway, Sioux and Puerto Rican descent, plans to continue her education in medicine so she can further assist Native American people.

World; and Renley Dennis, a Choctaw citizen, is working to make his grandmother proud with a master's of arts in Native American Studies and Juris Doctorate.

"I came to Oklahoma from Montana specifically for this program. I believe OU has one of the best Native American programs in the country," Perdash says. "I couldn't be happier here. So many programs just have '101-type' Native American classes, but OU has several emphases and a depth you don't get anywhere else."

Weryackwe came to OU after his mother passed away and he had dropped out of school. He joined the Native American Studies Department and found a community and support system, as well as new passions and a connection to his family.

"It's exciting being a student teacher. My mother got her Ph.D. at OU, and she was an educator as well. So I grew up

around education my whole life, but I didn't plan on following this path," Weryackwe says. "But I've enjoyed moving from a student to a teaching assistant. I think the education that transpires here is one in which the teacher isn't the only one who's teaching. There's a joy to it."

The journey to become a top program in the nation has not been without obstacles. With a rich, 22-year history, OU's Native American Studies program became a degree-granting unit in 1994.

"Really though, our roots extend even farther back into the university's history, beginning in 1915 when American Indian students met with the university president and requested classes in Indian subject matter," explains Cobb-Greetham.

Over the years, Native American Studies has taken many different shapes across campus. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s,



Hugh Scott

Amanda Cobb-Greetham, director of the Department of Native American Studies, poses with a star quilt sewn by her Chickasaw grandmother, Ida Mae (Dinah) Pratt Cobb, who was featured in a book about government-run schools for Indian children (inset at left).

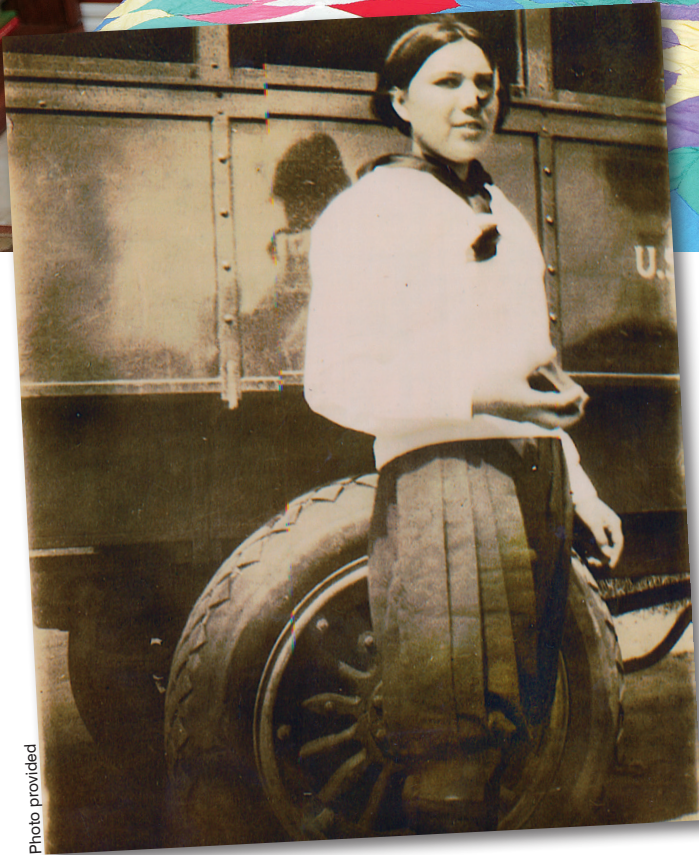


Photo provided

OU President William Bennett Bizzell had a vision to create a building and program dedicated to Native American coursework. Although the physical building never materialized, classes in Native American culture and history became part of the curriculum, making OU the second university nationwide to offer such courses.

“We consider that to be the origin of our department on campus,” Cobb-Greetham says.

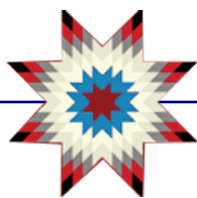
Today, as the program transitions into a full-fledged department in the College of Arts and Sciences, current students, faculty and staff are creating new dreams and visions.

The importance of Native American cultures is felt

across OU’s campus. On October 12, the university replaced Columbus Day with an Indigenous Peoples’ Day celebration. University President David L. Boren continued Bizzell’s vision by choosing this occasion to announce the elevation of NAS to a full-fledged department and the creation of the new Native Nations Center, which will be the hub of Native American activities and resources, as well as a research center featuring internationally recognized scholars with conference rooms and seminar spaces. According to Cobb-Greetham, the Native Nations Center will make OU the undisputed national leader in this area. And, like star quilts, the Center will turn existing pieces into something far greater than the sum of its parts.

This year the department plans to add to its four tenure and tenure-track professors by hiring a new faculty member specializing in Indigenous language revitalization. In the years to come, the department hopes to increase the number of majors and graduate students and to offer a doctoral degree.

Currently, the program offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Native American Studies. Since recently revising the degree program, all students take core classes in Indigenous theory and research methods before selecting an area of emphasis in either tribal governance and policy;



Indigenous media and arts; or language, cultural knowledges and history.

“Each area of emphasis draws not only from the strengths of Native American Studies but from the OU campus at large,” Cobb-Greetham says. Indigenous media and arts students have access to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art collections, and OU is home to the Native Crossroads Film Festival.

“For me, it has always been a living culture. But I definitely think outdated ideas are something we, as Indian students, are

confronted with,” Weryackwe says. “What NAS does is highlight the contributions tribes and tribal members make to the state and country, which I think is beneficial for everyone. We should all realize our worth and communicate that to others, Native and non-Native.”

The NAS also offers a joint master’s and juris doctorate that many students take advantage of to further understand Native history, identity and sovereignty. Perdash says she plans to enter the MA/JD program after she obtains her bachelor’s, while

Growing a National Resource

BY HEATHER AHTONE

The Native American Studies Department at OU has rich resources at hand, including the Western History Collections and the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History. And since 1996, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art has grown to become a national treasure for the study of Native American art.

The acquisition that year of the Richard H. and Adeline J. Fleischaker Collection, followed by gifts from Dr. and Mrs. R.E. Mansfield, and Charles H. and Miriam S. Hogan, established OU as a regional center for the study of Indigenous art. With the arrival of the Eugene B. Adkins Collection in 2007, the Rennard Strickland Collection in 2008, and the James T. Bialac Collection in 2010, the OU museum became fully representative of the developments in Native American art throughout the 20th century, with more to come.

A knowledgeable and savvy collector, Jim Bialac continues to purchase and donate contemporary works to the Fred Jones, including the sifter basket pictured above. “Separating the Chaff,” by Cherokee artist Shan Goshorn, is one example of how 21st-century Native art can function on two levels: preserving traditional beauty while making a statement of what it is to be Indian today.

When filled with cracked grain and gently shaken, the large weave at the base of a sifter basket would allow husks to fall through while retaining the desirable kernel. The woven splints of “Separating the Chaff” are printed with illustrations and text from 1960s

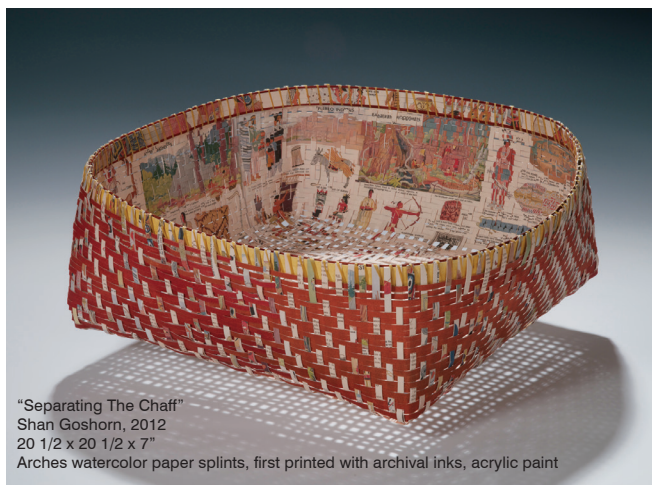
reference books that were used to teach American children about Native cultures. The basket is meant to show that Indian people need to decide how they want to portray themselves and actively filter through misperceptions and untruths.

Building on the strength of the museum’s collections, its curator, OU professors and graduate interns have been developing exhibitions that recognize the arts as a critical form of communi-

cation for oral-based cultures. Their original scholarship is helping to connect materials, designs and metaphors with tribal knowledge expressed in art from pre-Columbian pottery to modern printmaking.

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located at 222 Elm Ave. Admission is always free.

Heather Ahtone is the James T. Bialac Assistant Curator of Native American and Non-Western Art at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.



“Separating The Chaff”
Shan Goshorn, 2012
20 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 7”
Arches watercolor paper splints, first printed with archival inks, acrylic paint



OU students Randi Hardin, left, and Kelbie Kennedy, both of the Choctaw Nation, celebrate Commencement 2015. Hardin, a dual-degree student, earned both her Juris Doctor with a certificate in Native American Law, as well as her Master of Arts in Native American Studies. Kennedy earned her Juris Doctor with a certificate in Native American Law.

Dennis is currently completing his second year in the program.

“My Choctaw background was important throughout my life because of my grandmother, who passed away in 2004,” Dennis says. “I have an understanding of the more modern Choctaw culture because of her. I would participate in the annual festival at Tushkahoma and other tribal events. Native American Studies at OU is just a continuation of that. My dad recently told me that my grandmother and great-grandmother would be so proud of me for getting my master’s and JD. For my dad to be able to say that ... oh yeah, that’s big.”

By integrating an understanding of tribal issues with his legal studies, Dennis believes that he will be better able to serve individual tribes. Moreover, students who take part in the joint program have an educational opportunity unlike anywhere else.

“As far as I know, we are the only university in the country to offer a joint master’s in Native American Studies and a JD,” Cobb-Greetham says.

In addition, approximately half of all juris doctorate students in the College of Law take an Indian law class, making the Native American Law Program one of the college’s primary areas of study. Oklahoma students recognize that Indian law issues may affect every area of practice, from administrative law to zoning law, contracts, property, family, personal injury, and environmental law. The Native

American law program prepares students for local or international practice.

OU Law is also home to the Center for the Study of American Indian Law and Policy, which provides counsel to tribal, state and national policymakers. The center was founded in 1990 by the late Rennard Strickland, a descendant of the Osage and Cherokee nations and a distinguished law scholar and Native American art collector. More recently, the John B. Turner LL.M. Program was established to offer a combination of courses – available only at OU – that allows students to choose from three specializations: energy and natural resources, Indigenous peoples law, or U.S. Legal Studies. Importantly, the MLS focuses on contemporary tribal governments.

“When many people think of Native American subject matter, they do think of an antiquated past. But the 39 tribal nations of Oklahoma and the 560 some-odd tribal nations of the United States are contemporary, living cultures and governments,” Cobb-Greetham says. “There never is the question of, ‘What are you going to do with your degree?’ Native American Studies at OU is uniquely competitive and highly valuable. We are a part of the fabric of the whole state.”

Katherine Parker is a freelance writer living in Oklahoma City.