
The Center for Tribal Social Work

*Indigenous social work students
draw on their cultural heritage to better
serve Native American communities.*

BY GINNIE GRAHAM

Courtney Bolt remembers the tough transition coming to the University of Oklahoma in Norman from Hominy, Okla., where she was the first in her family to graduate from college.

A citizen of the Potawatomi Nation and a descendant of the Red Lake Ojibwe and Kickapoo Nations, she often felt alone on what seemed a massive campus.

“The culture shock of being in the minority is real,” Bolt says. “Many Indigenous students, like myself, come from small, close-knit communities, where the population of Indigenous people is very high. We are surrounded by our culture and our families. Even though Indigenous people are in the minority everywhere else, in our communities, we are not alone. Life is completely different when you leave.”

“I remember feeling small and intimidated. I didn’t feel confident enough to ask questions and worried about being discovered as a person who didn’t belong. My personality hid that well, being



Jacobi Campbell/OU Tulsa

Cortney Bolt (Potawatomi, Red Lake Ojibwe and Kickapoo), program manager at the Center for Tribal Social Work, and Dallas Pettigrew (Cherokee), center director, discuss the difficulties some Indigenous students have when they leave their small communities for a large university environment.

bubbly and friendly. But people’s perception of me was not how I was feeling.”

Remembering those feelings guides her in a new program at OU-Tulsa that nurtures better outcomes for Indigenous students and their communities.

The Center for Tribal Social Work launched in 2018 with a goal to provide culturally aware child welfare workers to Native American tribes. Its success has led to an expansion of providing scholarships to Indigenous graduate and undergraduate students and training in other social work areas.

The first class of 10 Indigenous graduate students began in fall 2019. They will return to their tribal communities after completing their social work degrees. All are first-generation graduate students, and some are the first in their families to finish college.

One way the center helps retain students who miss the tight-knit support of their communities is to provide them with a surrogate family member, in this case, an “Academic Auntie.” Bolt, a program manager with the center, enthusiastically took on the role in addition to her regular duties.

“An auntie is someone who has walked the path before,” Bolt says. “She knows the ropes and cares about you and is in-

vested in your success. There is a relational aspect of being an auntie, just like in real life.

“Within a lot of tribes, the role of auntie is important. It’s someone’s mom’s or dad’s cool sister. You can ask them things that you can’t ask mom and dad. Aunties will hold you accountable in a loving, caring way. I wish I’d had that as a student.”

Undergraduate student Brittani Candioto, a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, meets with Bolt once a week, asking advice on everything from the meaning of “business casual” to tips on lowering stress during finals. Her auntie makes sure she is up on her studies.

“Auntie is my lifesaver,” Candioto says. “I can be upfront, laid back and ask any question bluntly that I wouldn’t dare ask my professors.”

Bolt is uniquely qualified to talk with students both about their personal struggles and professional goals. She worked in the Oklahoma Department of Human Services child welfare system for 13 years, eventually becoming a supervisor and earning a master’s degree. She often interacted with tribal child welfare workers, gaining insight on how the two systems work.

“In many ways, [tribal] training is more complex than core training at the state,” Bolt says. “When you talk about sov-

ereignty, that means each tribe is its own country with its own constitution and citizens all over the globe. Tribal social workers have to know both systems. They must be able to wear more hats than state workers.”

Dallas Pettigrew, MSW and a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, had worked in his tribe’s child welfare division before he was hired by the Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work at OU-Tulsa in the spring of 2017. He realized the important role a University tribal social work center could play in improving both educational opportunities and community services.

Starting in 2018, Pettigrew reached out to tribes for ways to share training resources. The mission of the center developed by listening to the needs of tribal social workers. “We believe tribes know best what works for tribes,” Pettigrew says.

The center began building a slow momentum. Then, a meeting between Pettigrew and Rita Hart, a social worker at the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs with a long history in child welfare work, accelerated the project.

Pettigrew met Hart during a Haruv USA conference. The Zarrow School of Social Work has an initiative with Israel’s Haruv Institute, funded by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, to research the identification, prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. It focuses on comprehensive education and training for students and professionals.

The two began to talk about how the research could be applied elsewhere.

“We realized that OU has all these exciting initiatives in social work,” recalls Pettigrew. “So, we talked about bringing together the expertise of tribes and resources of the University to build a unique training program.”

The first funding was \$150,000 from the BIA, which spread the word about the center and aided in providing 13 initial rounds of training. While many tribes are from the Oklahoma region, training has extended as far as Alaska. Soon, Pettigrew found himself as a national speaker on the lack of adequate training for tribal social workers.

“There are plenty of training opportunities for tribes,



Lisa Byers (Cherokee), associate professor of social work at OU-Tulsa, center, celebrates with Harmony Revard Fuller (Osage), left, the first student to obtain the Graduate Certificate in Social Work With American Indians, and Molly Bryant (Cherokee), a Licensed Master of Social Work in Tulsa.

but not from a tribal perspective. Many trainings don’t even mention tribes and don’t mention historical or generational trauma,” Pettigrew says.

Existing training also ignored tribal history, misunderstood sovereignty and perpetuated stereotypes, he says.

The OU-Tulsa center took the approach that training ought to be based on what tribes say they need, using their language and cultural touchstones. OU provides resources like a simulation center and information on the latest child brain development.

The simulation exercises use Indigenous actors on a set designed with items often found in a tribal home, such as certain herbs, clothing or artwork. Positive feedback leads the process.

Within 18 months, the center attracted \$1.6 million, including grants from the BIA, Casey Family Programs, Capacity Building Center for Tribes and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute.

The goals of the center include ensuring tribal members receive the best available social work services; eliminating negative disparities among tribal members; recruiting, retaining and graduating more tribal members; providing training and workforce development for and with tribes; and developing a research agenda guided by tribes.

The grants were key to upping the center’s recruitment of Indigenous graduate students by providing full scholarships. Tribes are now working on paths to get their citizens into the center.

For example, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation offers an associate degree in tribal service at its College of the Muscogee Nation in Okmulgee, Okla., that transfers into the OU



“We promote Indigenous social workers as a way of reclaiming the strengths and knowledge that has been ours since the beginning of time. It is not about creating new ways; it’s about accessing old ones.”

Carissa O’Dell (Choctaw/Cherokee), left, and Cortney Bolt enjoy celebrating their Indigenous culture by participating in powwows and dances, which have been canceled this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. O’Dell is an MSW graduate student and a Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program caseworker with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.

Bachelor of Social Work degree program. Students can then finish a master’s degree in three semesters.

Even with such seamless arrangements, recruitment into a major university can be challenging.

“OU is intimidating to some tribal people,” Pettigrew says. “They may be a first-generation college student, may come from poor, small schools or had no plans to go to college because that’s not what people in their family did.”

Pettigrew understands these social obstacles. He came from Stilwell, Okla., known for being one of the most poverty-stricken areas in the nation.

“For me, OU was a distant dream,” Pettigrew says. “It might as well have been Oxford or Harvard.”

This shared experience is a bond between staff and students.

Candioto calls the program “an opportunity of a lifetime” and has thrived at OU-Tulsa. She is president of the Social Work Student Association, representing OU and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation on a national advisory board that helps fund grants to tribal social work students.

“The center brings more diversity and education about who Native American people are and why we are here,” Candioto says. “It gives us a better chance to provide opportunities for the tribes.”

Child welfare is about the protection of children; a sometimes heartbreaking and emotionally challenging job. Indigenous people have an added layer of historical trauma, she says.

Tribal children, some just a generation or two ago, Candioto says, were taken from their families and placed in boarding

schools, where they were forbidden to use Native languages, wear traditional clothing or engage in cultural practices.

Instances of stolen land, fewer educational opportunities and criminal injustice have led to poverty and distrust of bureaucratic systems in Indigenous communities, adds Pettigrew. Understanding this history and how it affects tribal citizens today gives Indigenous social workers an edge on how to implement best practices to strengthen families.

“We promote Indigenous social workers as a way of reclaiming the strengths and knowledge that has been ours since the beginning of time,” says Bolt. “It is not about creating new ways; it’s about accessing old ones.”

With shared resources and help from the tribes, training could expand into other tribal services, such as food distribution, elder services, domestic violence, general assistance, early education and public health.

As the center seeks to expand, Pettigrew’s thoughts always circle back to the students who will put the program’s work into practice. He offers each of them a motivational thought.

“If you have gotten into graduate school that is a huge success,” he says. Despite systemic racism, “we are the descendants of the strongest people who ever lived.

“In 600 years of genocide attempts, we have not only survived but thrived. We are the dreams of our grandparents. When students buy into that dream and vision, I see it. They are so committed to this work.”

Ginnie Graham is a reporter and editor for the Tulsa World.