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Academic Legerdemain: When Literacy Standards Become a Sleight of Hand

1. The bare stage

Introductions and the long-term problem

With newly-minted Ph.D. in hand, I accepted a tenure-track teaching position (my first) that brought me to rural Alaska. I was to be the only English faculty member at a very small extended campus of the University of Alaska Southeast. On paper, this campus and I seemed a good fit. They needed a generalist, and as a generalist, I brought with me several years of university teaching, administrative work, and community service. What I didn't know is that I was entering into a situation that would call into question my role as a teacher, my ethics, and my career.

When I interviewed at this campus, I was stunned, as many city-dwellers are, by the remarkable beauty of Alaska. I was also aware that my ideas of this state were conditioned on Hollywood and TV renditions of reindeer and salmon and moose. Oh my. So before arriving in Alaska, I did my homework. I learned that Alaska Native secondary students had one of the highest non-retention rates of all minority groups, a figure of about 25%, according to Richard St. Germaine, citing a 1994 National Center for Education Statistics report ("Drop-Out Rate Among American Indians and Alaska Native Students: Beyond Cultural Discontinuity"). The issues are innumerable, reports Nancy Gale in her 1991 article, "Fighting Alcohol and Substance Abuse among American Indian and Alaskan Youth," and include dysfunctional families with histories of drug and alcohol abuse, often approximating 80%, and fetal alcohol syndrome. Native families experience a higher than average occurrence of domestic abuse and their children receive inadequate (often poor) academic preparation. Added to these influences is a culture that tends to distrust Western education because its competitive, individual-focused instruction is anathema to the collectivist society of many Alaska Natives who celebrate the "we" and not the "I." As a white woman, therefore, I was a member of the often mistrusted dominant white culture that was larger than the Native population.

Yet, as Native and non-Native educators and a host of others continue their ongoing

attempts to address these issues with varying degrees of success, there are small successes sprinkled throughout Alaska. One, Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka, Alaska, prepares students for college by providing a boarding school setting, an innovative academic program taught by a number of Native teachers, and boasting a graduation rate of about 68% (in 1993) according to Kathleen Cotton's 1994 analysis of the school, "Applying Total Quality Management Principles to Secondary Education."

"what happens when
assessment, standards,
and culture collide"

Also while I was in the last stages of finishing and defending my dissertation, my new college was celebrating its reception of a U.S. Department of Education grant.

In this essay, I offer my experience and discuss what happens when a well-intentioned grant fails because it loses its

focus from serving students to preserving the grant. I discuss the plan of this FIPSE grant; I examine what happens when assessment, standards, and culture collide; I address what happens when literacy standards are re-defined and work to cloud the meaning of the concept; and I explore what happens when professional and institutional pressures encouraged faculty to compromise professional, personal, and ethical standards.

2. The magicians

This FIPSE plan

The desire to find a solution to improve Native education is a noble one. Academics, administrators, legislators, social workers, business leaders, and the Native community have for years sought answers to this perplexing problem. One solution was offered by a University of Alaska Southeast campus in U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant. Perhaps the Holy Grail of postsecondary grants, FIPSE, according to its website, is a "small program . . . [that] has established a record of promoting meaningful and lasting solutions to various, often newly emerging problems." What sets FIPSE apart from other grants is its focus on "widely felt problems . . . rather than on special interest groups or prescribed solutions"; its responsiveness to "local initiatives . . . to local problems . . . that have wider influence"; its "action-oriented approach . . . usually involving direct implementation of new ideas"; and its "risk-taking." Funding roughly the top 3%, the FIPSE program generates a pool of applicants that are highly competitive and aggressive. A FIPSE grant is quite the feather in any college's cap.

The University of Alaska Southeast campus grant, "Academic and Cultural Support for First-Year Alaska Native Students," quotes statistics that are compelling. According to the

grant, the "1993 Education Task Force of the Alaska Natives' Commission reported that approximately 30 percent of Alaska Native students leave Alaskan high schools without a diploma . . . [E]nrollment statistics of Alaskan post-secondary institutions demonstrate that while Alaska Natives comprise 13 percent of the State's population, only 9 percent of the 30,793 students enrolled in 1990 at all state campuses were Native students" ("Academic and Cultural Support"1). My research from a variety of sources including the FIPSE grant, the 1991 U.S. Department of Education Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, Lynn Olson's "Achievement Gap Widening, Study Reports," and Janet Ponessa's "SAT, ACT Scores Up but Racial Gap Remains," all confirm that this gap between the educational achievements of white and non-white (including Native American and Alaska Native) students continues.

This FIPSE grant offered a solution to close the educational gap between Native and non-Native students and promised Native students success in college. This grant's solution hinged on the success of introducing Native students, many from remote bush villages, to college culture and thereby academic perseverance, through the creation of a living situation (in the dorm) similar to that of their homes, and recruiting local Natives to serve as mentors. The assumption proffered the idea that creating an *academic* home, a "family," would help alleviate homesickness, a strong element in college non-retention rates in Alaska, and, therefore, Alaska Natives would thrive as students. However, because so few Alaska Native students choose post-secondary education, the pool of talented students was very small, and those students often opted to attend the university in Anchorage or Fairbanks. Consequently, many of the grant students were inadequately (often poorly) prepared for college, and some were simply poor high school students (average high school GPA was D).

When I arrived in Alaska, the grant was beginning its second year of a three-year grant period. The previous grant "program leader" had been replaced by a non-Native, white married couple. Before that fall semester, about a dozen students from about a dozen villages, towns, and cities, representing about a dozen kinds of lifestyles and ethnicities, came together to create a "collegiate 'family'," with the FIPSE program leaders living elsewhere ("Academic and Cultural Support" 4), functioning as surrogate parents.

The premise of this FIPSE grant, the linchpin of its success, was that the "collegiate family groupings" would acculturate Native students to the academic environment and, therefore, produce student-scholars ("Academic and Cultural Support" 4). Unfortunately, problems began immediately. Mentors were unreliable. The FIPSE program leaders, already on-call 24-hours, were unprepared for the volume, complexity, and variety of complications the dozen or so students produced. Some students who had never lived away from home, and some who had never lived in a place with more than 150 people, were now treated as adults and expected to conduct themselves as adults. Isolated from their peers and homesick, some students

continued their pre-college habits of drug and alcohol abuse. Many of the students dismissed the education process and by mid-term were failing more than one of their classes.

But the most egregious failing of this FIPSE grant was the abandonment of the grant's basic tenets: "to serve the students of this project well" (4). To the administrators of the FIPSE grant, success apparently came to be measured *not* by the achievements of students, but in implicitly encouraging faculty to lower their standards in order to retain the grant. The grant administrators never, to my knowledge, issued a memo stating how to preserve the grant. Instead, at the regular faculty and advisor meetings, the grant administrators peppered us with cautionary words about being team players and issued thinly veiled observations that faculty needed to work harder.

To save the FIPSE grant, administrators re-defined the standards of literacy, compromised the academic success of the grant students, and engendered a situation where faculty valued their careers before their ethics or students.

Students were lost. The grant was saved.

3. The illusion

Assessment, standards, and culture collide

Bolstered by the successes of Mt. Edgecumbe High School's boarding school environment and influenced by the general understanding of a student's need for supportive family and friends, defined goals, cultural and academic relevance, self discipline, and small class size, this University of Alaska Southeast campus undertook to combine many of these elements in designing the FIPSE grant. Its "three-year project" would attempt to solve the problems of "barriers to educational success" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 4). Notably, the grant identified the "loss of traditional support structures, including both traditional family mentors (usually aunt/uncle, grandmother/grandfather in the Native cultures of Alaska) and close rural village relationships, resulting in emotional and cultural isolation at the critical stages when the student's traditional value system and self-concept are most challenged" (4).

As the "core of the project," the FIPSE grant administrators' proposed solution involved the following requirement:

the creation of collegiate "family" groupings to augment the support of natural family and village relationships, as well as to provide a more culturally appropriate academic support structure than the typical institutionalized student service units. The collegiate families will collectively develop the coping skills necessary to succeed in a new, frequently intimidating, social and educational environment, thereby overcoming the isolation which most Native students currently experience as college freshmen. (4)

These "collegiate 'family' groupings" were to be led by an "educator/mentor *representing* [emphasis mine] the "Apa or Uppa (the elder leader, in Alaska cultures usually the Uncle or Aunt, Grandfather or Grandmother), thus filling the central role in the traditional Native educational process" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 5). As stipulated by the grant, students were to "commit to the family for two consecutive semesters of study . . . reside in a group environment and participate, with the mentor, in organized family activities" (5).

This sounds like a perceptive, sensitive approach to problem-solving. Who would argue with a solution that encourages a seamless transition from the student's home family to "collegiate family groupings"? But what happened calls into question a fundamental misunderstanding behind the initial premise of the grant, to create a "collegiate family." To become a family, as many blended families will attest, may take years and require hard work. To imitate, or even replicate, the Alaska Native student's home family demands time, hard work, and a profound grasp of a student's culture. The Native "collegiate family groupings," however, were led by white "educator/mentors" who, though they were supposed to "represent the Apa or Uppa (the elder leader)" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 5)—an already daunting expectation—quite simply did not know enough about the Native culture. Furthermore, to "[r]e-enforce this family bond," students were to be "housed together, share meals, and participate in a year-long career planning course (3-credit per semester)" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 5–6). The reality was that some students lived in the dorm, some students took meals together, and most students completed the planning course. But not all the grant students lived in the dorm; some students were from the college town and lived at home or elsewhere.

Another of the grant's propositions stated that an "additional continuing effort . . . will be interaction between . . . students and Native Alaskan families and community members . . . as well as Native leaders serving as appropriate role models and mentors" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 6). In fact, students had limited contact with the community, and Native leaders willing to become mentors were difficult to find. One student's father, a community leader, did serve as his son's mentor; other students who lived in the community had self-made support systems around them.

The grant's other promises included continued contact from students with their families by telephone, letters, a "collegiate family production of videotapes," and e-mail. Did students write and call home? Probably. Did they e-mail? Probably, but only if their town or village had the technology to offer Internet access and had electronic capacity, and most did not. Did they produce a videotape? Did all of these efforts work to relieve homesickness? Did these efforts retain students? Did these efforts produce the scholar/student?

Recall that the FIPSE grant's premise was to re-create a home-like setting in the dorm (a "collegiate family") in order to dispel homesickness and perpetuate cultural connections.

Yet, the three most successful grant students in my classes were from the college's town and lived at home. Those students who lived in the dorm did not, on the whole, adhere to the grant's "family" structure. The dorm students, most of them on their own for the first time, often were overwhelmed and heady with their new freedoms and became just as susceptible as non-Natives to the dangers of those freedoms. But remember that these students were supposed to be in a "family" structure, mentored, and participating in strategies to "establish self-determination skills and high levels of personal responsibility for decision-making and academic persistence" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 6). The "collegiate family groupings" and the "educator/mentors" were supposed to recognize potential problems and solve them. An idealistic endeavor to be sure. In reality, drug and alcohol use/abuse proved to be the most damning of the problems.

"cutting classes,
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My experiences with the grant students in two academic years of the grant's tenure were shared by many of my colleagues. In private conversations with my colleagues, we shared our experiences with some typical student behavior: cutting classes, missing deadlines, quizzes, and tests, dismissing assignment instructions. We also experienced some atypical student conduct: the visibly hung-over student. As educators we struggled to find ways to overcome these issues.

Even in my basic writing class, which included roughly 90% of the grant students, many of these students were at a writing and mechanical skills level far below that of other basic writing students I've taught. As a way to combat the poor skills of my students, I altered the course content by focusing on expository writing for a longer period of time instead of moving into analytic work. I held extra office hours, encouraged students to talk with me before and after class, and worked with them in small groups. However, like the students of many of my colleagues, most of my grant students were failing.

Yet instead of addressing the issues of students' poor attendance, mediocre skills, and failing grades, the grant administrators relaxed academic standards of literacy and assessment. Instead of believing that Native students can succeed at higher education, the grant administrators implicitly dictated to its faculty a mandate to find ways to pass grant students, to give the grant students special treatment. How? Suggestions included giving students extra credit and allowing extra time to complete assignments, giving small quizzes instead of tests, dropping bad grades, not counting absences.

This well-intentioned grant failed, I believe, because in their determination to retain the grant and to produce the kinds of results the grant promised, the grant administrators generated an environment that focused on keeping the grant at just about any cost and replaced the initial reason behind the grant—"to serve the students of this project well" (1)—with an unreasonable one—to keep the grant. Secondly, the grant failed because when the grant administrators created an imitation dorm "family," this isolated students physically and emotionally from their peers, and as a result, this isolation worked to perpetuate pre-college abusive behaviors.

4. The rabbits escape from the hat

Literacy standards and FIPSE students

The chief battle in the war between perception and reality concerning the FIPSE grant, involved the statement: "the project has established a goal to retain all . . . students through two consecutive semesters" (7), which was followed by a statement found in the "Management Plan" section of the grant: "100% of students who enter the . . . program will complete 2 full-time semesters of postsecondary work . . . with a GPA of 2.0 or higher" (4). While the second statement seeks to clarify the first, it instead adds troubling requirements. The first statement contends that it is a "goal" of the project to "retain all . . . students through two consecutive semesters"; the second statement seems to omit the "consecutive semesters" requirement but then layers its own conditions when it declares that students "will complete 2 full-time semesters," and they will do so with a "GPA of 2.0 or higher" ("Academic and Cultural Support"4). It seems to me that any grant that declares that *all* of its students will finish two consecutive semesters with C's, points implicitly to an understanding that grant students would receive passing grades.

Lisa Delpit in *Other People's Children* and others have pointed out just how damaging such a relaxation of standards can be for students coming from minority cultures. To pass students "without attending to obvious deficits . . . [in order] to function effectively" (Delpit 38), may be useful in salvaging grants, but it is ultimately one of the worst options for the student populations these grants are meant to serve. Giving grant students special treatment robs them of the opportunity to acquire the literacy skills necessary to succeed in the dominant culture, which in Alaska is the white culture. Yet, when Delpit defines the concept of how literacy is understood, she states that the practice of literacy, an unequivocal good in Western civilization, is also "typically a solitary endeavor" that can "also promote alienation in communities that value collaboration and interaction" (93–4). The FIPSE grant administrators did not insist on a standard of literacy that taught students how to participate and be successful in Western-oriented education and society.

Nor did the grant administrators insist on promoting "collaboration and interaction" (Delpit 93) by privileging what Scott Richard Lyons, in his essay, "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?," calls "*rhetorical sovereignty*," the "inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires . . . to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449–450). The grant did not seek to establish cross-cultural communication that encourages teachers to use their knowledge and resources while celebrating and acknowledging the rich tapestries of multiple intelligences and experiences that Alaska Native students bring to the classroom. Indeed, the FIPSE program leaders (the married couple) had almost sole contact with grant students outside of the academic setting.

What happened? The grant students quickly learned that they were a special group; they were told how important the grant was; they were encouraged to remain an intact group, and, even though intercultural interaction was not prevented, grant students became increasingly isolated from their non-Native peers. Non-grant students quickly learned that the grant students were the entitled ones. Non-grant students, on several occasions, told me that they knew grant students were "being passed" without doing the work to justify the pass; non-grant students discerned from a variety of tacitly implied ways that grant students were being judged by a very different academic rule book. Remember that this is a very small campus, and students talk. The result was that some grant students learned from others that special status can create special circumstances—passing grades—and some grant students used this special status to continue in their pre-college habits, including the dismissal of education.

And what was the response of the grant administrators? This FIPSE grant is important, the faculty was reminded. And, tugging at faculty emotions, the grant administrators often cautioned that losing the grant jeopardized the education of Native students. Yet in order to do what the grant implicitly required, faculty were confronted with the real prospect of having to compromise their academic and literacy standards.

The grant itself was now the problem.

By mid-term, the grant administrators were unhappy with teachers who had failing students. We were told to do a better job and to find ways to pass students. Most English teachers I know will do backflips to help students be successful. We all know the drill—we hold extra office hours, provide extra help, get tutors, take students to learning centers, accept late work, and offer countless suggestions in an effort to serve students.

Find ways to pass students. This ambiguous sentence managed to instill and perpetuate in me fears of failure, not only to my students, but to my profession, and to myself. In almost twenty years of college teaching, I had never been told to find a way to pass a student. This was my first posting, and I was scared of losing it.

When W.C. Fields was on his deathbed, he was found reading the Bible. Not a religious man, he was asked why. His response was that he was looking for loopholes. I went in search of loopholes. I found one located in directions for assigning grades. A grade of "No Basis" (NB) could be given if a student disappeared from class or turned in insufficient work to merit a grade. I had taught at three colleges prior to coming to the University of Alaska. These places did not issue a grade of NB.

In further conversations with my colleagues, I learned that the NB was, indeed, a popular grade distributed to grant students. Why? Since the NB does not factor into the student's GPA, this grade seemingly relinquished responsibility of the professor of record. The FIPSE grant *Management Plan* promised "2 full-time semesters of post secondary work . . . with a GPA of 2.0 or higher." As a result, the student who did not officially drop, the student who did not request an incomplete, the student who simply disappeared, or failed to turn in work could be given the NB and that grade would not alter his/her GPA. Therefore, the NB grade was the perfect solution of grant administrators whose mandate was for teachers to pass students. Then the grant administrators advised the faculty to award the NB grade to *any* student who might reasonably (another ambiguous term) warrant it. But for teachers laboring to find ways to pass students, the NB grade had many disquieting ethical implications.

5. On another stage

Basic writing students

My students were sweet, troubled, funny, hard-headed, artistic, and lazy. A typical mix. They were also, however, some of the most academically ill-prepared students I had ever encountered, and most, I found, were products of a secondary educational system composed of "poor teaching at best and institutional racism at worst" (Delpit 38). Most of my students' teachers were non-Native and "temporary"—meaning their teachers were from the Lower 48 and lured to Alaska with the promise of a very high salary to teach in the villages. Most "temporary" teachers lasted no more than three years. Most were ill-prepared for the kinds of challenges that Native students presented. To most teachers, multiculturalism meant Hispanic or African American students, and their schooling in how to teach multicultural students involved using multicultural texts. Lyons points out that the brand of "mainstream multiculturalism" taught to students in education programs "may affirm the rightful and creative existence of Indian cultures and peoples among others," but it also tends to "focus on the *people* but typically not the *nation* and that isn't necessarily the practice or honoring of Indian sovereignty" (457).

Regrettably, I was no exception. I like to think that I overcame my lack of preparation by intense seat-of-the-pants study. I like to think that I became a good teacher of Native students, but maybe I was just another Western teacher armed with multicultural texts and not a

clue of how to truly teach multicultural students. Over the course of my two years teaching grant students (and other Native students), I saw in some Native students' attitudes and behaviors a resistance to Western education. But what truly dismayed me was the look of disillusionment I saw in some students' eyes. Even those students who were specially selected as recipients of this grant, were often cynical about what a Western education could do for them.

In each semester of my two-year involvement with the grant, I taught a basic writing class. All of the grant students started their college writing experience in the basic writing class, and in each of those semesters, I had both new grant students and those repeating the course. In each of my four semesters of teaching basic writing, I had five or six grant students, other Native students, and non-Native (mostly white) students.

On their first day in class, the diagnostic essay prompt asked students to tell me about life in their home town. Their essays were awful. Students committed so many mechanical errors (spelling, grammar, sentence construction, and paragraph development) that their ideas and meanings were lost in a quagmire of fragments, run-on sentences, and missing thesis statements. I didn't return their essays and immediately began retooling my course content, writing exercises, assignments, and readings to address the multitude of writing and reading issues that my students represented. Though I used a different handbook for each of the four semesters, I stuck with two primary texts, *New Worlds of Literature*, edited by Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter, and *Language Awareness*, edited by Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark, because they were especially inclusive in regards to culture and ethnicity. And I thought both texts contained interesting writing.

As a way to introduce students to reading college material, I chose *New Worlds of Literature*. The format of the text included fiction, poetry, drama, and essays; the text's sections were titled "Home," "Family," "Heritage," "Language," "Aliens," "Fences," "Crossing," "Americans," and "Beliefs"; I liked the format and thought the movement of writing from home to beliefs seemed appropriate for my new students.

In the first month of each of my four semesters with grant students, we worked our way through each of the sections of the Beaty and Hunter text. In each class, we read the poems, discussed them, and then students chose one of the poems to respond to in a short (about 200 word) journal entry. Sometimes I imposed a specific assignment; for example after reading Diane Burns' "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question," I asked students to try writing a poem of their own about the kinds of stereotypes they, as Natives, encountered. Not surprisingly, they wrote about one of the stereotyped images I had of Natives. When I came to Alaska, for example, I expected Native students to have "Indian" names. They didn't, and the only student who had an "Indian" name told me that her grandfather was from a tribe in the Lower 48. So much for my childhood of watching westerns.

In another assignment, after reading R.T. Smith's "Red Anger," I asked students to discuss the anger of the speaker and to make a list of things that angered them. In addition to the many pet peeves (such as notably irritating siblings) that anger all of us, many stu-

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dents wrote about Western tourists who wanted to see Natives act "Native." One student wrote that since tourism is such an important industry in Alaska, his family earned some its income by giving tourists to his village what they wanted—Native dances, ceremonies, and rituals—all for the price of admission.

Each of these specific assignments, very emotional in nature, sought to encourage these students, self-conscious and well-schooled in the Native ways of modesty, to begin to find their voices. And they did.

Slowly. Very slowly. Though I asked students to read from their journals, few volunteered, and I did not collect their journals because I wanted that first month of college writing to be free from criticism. Even so, by the end of the first month, students should have had eight journal entries. By the end of the first month, however, some grant students began missing classes; others did attend class but didn't write. True, other Native and non-Native basic writing students had attendance issues, and some of them failed to write as well, but all of us noted the conspicuous absence of the grant students and their lack of attention to assignments.

After that first month of reading and studying poetry, we moved to selections from the text *Language Awareness*. Like the Beaty and Hunter text (and many others), *Language Awareness* takes students on a journey of discovery of the uses of language. Unlike my use of *New Worlds of Literature*, I didn't make use of each *Language Awareness* section and cherry-picked what I thought would be interesting readings that would provide motivating assignment prompts.

I use portfolio grading so students may revise as often as they need to before the portfolio is due at mid and end terms. In all my basic writing classes, I focus on whatever grammatical or mechanical issue most of the students needed work on. The grant students (and others) needed work on every aspect of writing. Also, since no developmental reading course existed, basic writing students, most of them poor readers, struggled with many reading assignments.

In all my composition classes, students bring their essay drafts to class, and after

instruction in how to conduct the peer review workshop, they work in groups on each others' essays. But because the basic writing class was so small (usually about seven students and only four students with drafts), the entire class would workshop each of the essays. Each class day included re-reading parts of the text, reading student essays, identifying errors, and addressing how to remedy them. Each class also revolved around the appearance and/or disappearance of grant students.

Two spectacularly different outcomes demonstrated the depth of issues I was facing. One event began with a reading of Paul Roberts' "A Brief History of English." Though this reading and its assignment came during the later half of the semester, students struggled with the text. And then while discussing my assignment—write a brief history of your language—some Native students pointed out how the use of English had led to the elimination of some Native languages. This comment, in turn, caused some white students to point out how dependent Natives are on whites, which, of course, led to a discussion on affirmative action. All of this was happening before students even wrote their essays. Now, I'm all for engaged classroom discussions, but what happened next was at once a democratic success—the class voted that they didn't want to write the essay (the warring students united to defeat the essay topic), and a pedagogical failure—they didn't write the essay.

On the bright side, students had little trouble reading Donald V. Mehus' "Contemporary American Graffiti," and they enjoyed writing about the graffiti found around campus, including Tlingit profanity. Educational for me, too.

Yet, more grant students failed the course than non-grant students. I gave the NB grade when I felt it was warranted but not often enough to please the grant administrators. I was told that there was something wrong with my teaching if so many students were failing. I was told to find ways to pass students.

The progress of grant students was dutifully reported at the faculty/advisor meetings. In addition to absences and poor work, teachers and advisors discussed how grant students (and others) demonstrated signs of drug and alcohol hangovers. Based on conversations from teachers and advisors, the grant administrators knew that students were experiencing difficulties in and out of the classroom, but instead of addressing what was happening in any meaningful ways, the grant administrators seemed to hope the issues would just go away.

While my work with the grant administrators became contentious and I left the university, my experience with all students, and especially grant students, confirmed that students, in ways great or small, struggle with college. My grant students' end term cover letters to me addressed the strengths and weakness of their semester and also spoke of the frustrations of their poor writing skills and their surprises when they overcame writing problems. Here, are the voices of a few of the grant students:

Ginny,¹ from a small village, had spotty attendance and repeated the class twice before passing. She wrote, "Every day is a struggle for me because every day I look at what I have done and realize that I have not got the skills to succeed."

Toni came from the college town and lived at home. She wrote well, one of the few A students. Yet in her letter, she wrote honestly of her difficulty with writing: "This class turned out to be tougher than I thought. . . . I certainly didn't expect the roadblocks I encountered."

Tina, also from the college town, was especially hard on herself. Using a sports metaphor, she describes her difficulties: "I really felt the ball was rolling in my court . . . but somehow the ball kept going out of bounds. Then suddenly it was half time, and when the game resumed it was a push to win the game!" She passed the class.

Nick, another college town student, and one of the few to have a college-educated parent, passed the class the first time. He wrote, "I like that we share what we have written and help each other. I have found that I actually really enjoy English after many [y]ears of having a[n] extreme disliking of the subject."

Claire struggled throughout the semester but passed. She wrote, "I believe my writing skills have improved, but I need to improve more than what they are now."

In my two years there, I taught 17 grant students. There were success stories. Five grant students in my classes did quite well. Three of the five were from the college's town; one village student whose parent was a teacher was the most successful of the village students. All of the passing students came from families that put a high value on a college education. These five grant students were the only students in my classes who successfully completed "2 consecutive semesters . . . with a GPA of 2.0 or higher." I believe that these students would have succeeded without the grant.

And the other grant students? Some stayed with the program for two semesters or more. Some transferred to other University of Alaska locations. A few went into vocational fields. Others dropped out.

6. The empty stage

Problems and solutions, and lessons learned

Hindsight is tricky.

The FIPSE grant failed for two basic reasons: first, what the grant administrators wanted grant students to accomplish collided with many of the students' poor academic preparedness and behavior; second, teachers were covertly intimidated into lowering their academic and literacy standards in order to save the grant.

1. "Ginny," "Toni," "Tina," "Nick," and "Claire" are invented names.

First, the grant failed because it set unrealistic expectations for itself. To state as a criterion of the grant that "100% of students who enter the . . . program will complete 2 full-time semesters of postsecondary work . . . with a GPA of 2.0 or higher" is, quite simply, an untenable goal. This goal cultivated a situation that placed retaining the grant as a primary responsibility and the teaching of Native students as a secondary consideration. It also placed faculty in impossible situations. The faculty had three choices: pass students regardless of requisite skills; give students the NB grade when it was not warranted; or continue to follow their own ethics and teach, thereby possibly placing their careers in jeopardy, which points to the second reason the grant failed. The grant failed because the grant administrators fostered an environment of academic legerdemain when it advised faculty to lower its academic and literacy standards.

A solution to both of these problems is one that Delpit and others have consistently promoted—teach students the literacy skills they need to survive in the dominant culture but also understand that the reason some students reject literacy is they feel that literacy and the dominant culture first rejected them (160). Furthermore, Don Trent Jacobs and Jon Reyhner in their article, "Preparing Teachers to Support American Native and Alaska Native Student Success and Cultural Heritage," describe how teacher-centered classrooms work against Native student collectivist upbringing. Educators with diverse populations must learn the language necessary to persuade minority students that acquiring literacy standards necessary to function within the dominant discourse does not necessitate abandoning Native ways. Simply passing students through the educational system is damaging to all concerned.

Also, the artificial environment created by the "collegiate family" isolated some Native students from their peers both in terms of their housing and their emotions. Therefore, abusive behaviors continued. To their own discredit, many grant students drank and took drugs. Destructive student behavior coupled with grant administrators who turned a blind eye to students created a situation in which students ignored the educational opportunity afforded them. Many grant students became complacent about their behavior and education because they were allowed to do so.

Another possible solution would be to work within the Native community to find the mentors promised in the grant. Ardy SixKiller Clarke articulates this point in his article, "Social and Emotional Distress Among American Indian and Alaska Native Students," when he states that "families with strong traditional values positively impact the academic success of . . . students." Recall that the grant students who fared the best lived in the college's town.

The grant also failed because it could not provide that vital connection between the Native students and their heritage. A more inclusive program that brought together grant and non-grant students might have helped prevent that "special," albeit inauspicious isolation that

occurred between grant and non-grant students. In fact, Kathleen Cotton posits such an approach by suggesting that students, rather than be isolated by ethnicity, be encouraged to form culturally heterogeneous cooperative learning teams. Drawing on the research finding of Gordon Allport, Cotton suggests these teams sought to increase intergroup contact under conditions in which students: (a) have equal status, (b) get to know one another as individuals, (c) have common interests and similar characteristics, (d) associate with one another according to equitable social norms set by leaders, (e) have an interest in cooperation, and (f) can advance individual or group goals through cross-cultural interaction. In addition, drawing on a host of other researchers, she argues that intercultural contact among students is beneficial (a) when it is extracurricular and social as well as academic, and (b) when it's frequent and sustained ("Fostering").

What happened instead was that the grant promoted the kind of exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness that William G. Tierney champions in his study, "The College Experience of Native Americans: A Critical Analysis." Tierney advocates "working with Native Americans toward a participatory goal of emancipation and empowerment" (323), which would create an environment in which students continue to learn to negotiate their way between cultures. In doing so, Tierney contends that students will continue to advance their own cultural awareness so that they will be able to succeed in the dominant society without losing their Native cultures and traditions. Both Cotton and Tierney point out that when students feel safe and respected in the classroom they are more inclined to take advantage of educational opportunities and to continue the work necessary to increase literacy.

There are other lessons learned. In the report produced by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, "Toward True Native Education," and cited in the *Journal of American Indian Education*, Native educator G. Mike Charleston calls for an "education that sincerely attempts to make American education more culturally relevant and supportive of native students and native communities" (27). Lyons calls for a "radical rethinking of how and what we teach as the written word" (450), especially in the "nature of their textual representations" (458). Charleston, Lyons, and others articulate one of the lessons I learned—simply using multicultural texts and providing an open forum for diverse opinions and voices does not automatically make a multicultural, multi-ethnic teacher. No one is advocating that Native Americans or Alaska Natives not learn to read and write. What is advocated suggests a complex need for cultural understanding.

What else did my experiences in Alaska and my Native students teach me? I learned that I had to do more than understand and transmit the dominant culture's code of literacy. I had to listen and to work to incorporate into my pedagogy the ways of knowing and learning that Native students brought to the classroom. I learned, again, that context is everything.

My most important lesson came from an Alaska Native friend, someone who lives peacefully in both Native and Western worlds and is the result of both Native and Western education. She told me that by making myself available to my Alaska Native students and by letting my students get to know me as I got to know them, they would respect me.

Finally, the FIPSE grant administrators' injudicious use of academic legerdemain—encouraging the lowering of academic and literacy standards to preserve the grant—seems to perpetuate the perception that Alaskan Native students are unable to succeed without the razzle-dazzle of sleight of hand. That perception is one best left in the magician's hat.

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