

TESTIMONY: John Bassett

Heritage University was established in 1982 by two Native American (Yakama) women and Sister Kathleen Ross, a member of the Order of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary who had been Provost of Fort Wright College. That institution had gone out of business, leaving the south central part of the state of Washington with no teacher-training program for the region. It is hard to imagine starting a private college the way Heritage started and also hard to imagine there was and is no other 4-year college within 70 miles of Toppenish in any direction. Heritage is located on tribal land (deeded to the University) of the Yakama Nation, the only college on reservation land that is not a tribal college.

Starting as a program in Education with 50-100 students on an impossibly tight budget, Heritage now has close to 1000 undergraduates and 400 graduate students (mostly in Education), and a diverse set of majors. Its mission for almost its entire existence has been to provide higher education opportunities to an educationally disadvantaged and largely place-bound population. In its early years it had about the same number of Native and Hispanic students. Because of the large growth of Hispanic peoples, mostly Mexican-American farm workers, undergraduates are now about 55% Hispanic and 10-12% Native American. The rest are a mixture of everything else. There is currently capacity and planning to grow to 2000 undergraduates and 1000 graduate students.

About 90% of the undergraduates are Pell-grant eligible, a percentage matched at perhaps no other private college. About 75-80% of the students are first in their family to attend college and fewer than 10% have a college graduate as a parent. The average family ability to pay (on the FAFSA form) is only \$150. So tuition is covered by Pell and State need based grants, philanthropy, and loans. Heritage tries to manage student loan burdens through equity-packaging of aid; but most of the upper classmen are transfers from community colleges and often arrive with large burdens.

Heritage is a commuter campus without residence halls but with three regional sites on community college campuses elsewhere in the state. These take only transfer students. Many young people grow up in our Yakima Valley with no sense of a future, no ability to see themselves as an airline pilot, scientist, business owner, or doctor. Our Upper Valley includes the city of Yakima, which has poverty but also wealth. The Lower Valley is very poor and only 6% of the adults there have a bachelors degree (Appalachia is 12%). In the Lower Valley half the

kids are gone from school before 12th grade to join a gang or have a baby or give up. The Reservation, moreover, like many reservations also includes a great deal of hopelessness. Our redefined mission at Heritage includes intentional strategies to reach children and their families at an early age, to help youth dream and to know the opportunities that are out there for anyone who is willing to work hard. Otherwise Heritage will always be treading water instead of effecting the major improvement in the region that is its goal.

I have been at Heritage four years. When I arrived, I realized Heritage scored badly on IPEDS graduation scores but also realized IPEDS covered only a teeny part of our population since many of our students were part-time students, most of our juniors were transfer students, and because our students' personal and economic conditions led to stop-out-and-return patterns that made 10-year graduation rates significantly better than 6-year rates.

To improve results, however, we have made several major changes. First a totally new admissions office is making sure that students who matriculate are ready to do the hard work needed to succeed. Second, a major investment in professional student support, advising and tutoring includes enhancement of the successful TRIO and CAMP programs. Students who get support in these programs, as well as those who get solid intentional tutoring elsewhere, have a much higher graduation rate than other students. Young people from the Yakima Valley can do anything a kid from Chevy Chase can do (I was a kid from Chevy Chase); they need more support because the Valley leaves them educationally behind. But the worst thing a teacher or adviser can do is let them graduate by getting over a low bar. If a Heritage graduate cannot compete effectively with a grad from Washington State or the University of Washington we are wasting our time.

So third we have developed a culture of high expectations, not always an easy transition for teacher or student. Fourth, we have invested in more full time faculty who are there for the students all week, as part-time adjuncts cannot be. Fifth, we have deliberately tried to broaden our student base to include more students who enter college with a clearer sense of ambitions and opportunities to help build on campus a culture of completion and success, not just a culture of access. Sixth, having learned that students who drop out generally have not committed themselves to a major or program, we are trying to connect freshmen to an area of interest if not a major and to show them how that passion can lead to a productive career. Seventh, we are working more and more with cohorts, with groupings of students who take classes together and thereby become more engaged with their

studies and programs because they bond with their shared group. Eighth, faculty members have agreed to take attendance regularly and to forward to the Dean of Students all red flags related to absence or poor performance. Ninth, we have improved our financial aid packaging to a more equitable formula that increases the number of students who can afford to stay in school.

The success stories at Heritage are what make almost everyone at the University love to come to work in the morning. Never have I seen a place where teachers are more dedicated to their students; and that is one reason I could forego retirement and have an encore career in the west. Our teacher prep program is a residency based (junior and senior years) program honored by the U. S. Department of Education and called by some in Olympia the best program in the state. Its placement rate is over 90%; and schools love the fact that the graduates are not only excellent teachers but have a culturally sensitive dimension for the region's diverse populations that no other program provides.

Some of the most amazing results are in our Business program. Professor Len Black provides a tough-love program for hard-working students and also has built a student team over the last decade that takes part every year in the SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise) Program that is now called Enactus. The team makes presentations in a regional, then a national competition about projects the group has done (for example, financial literacy for middle school kids; helping Mexican-American farmers start and market their new business; helping women in Belize use recycled products to make baskets). The presentations are judged by teams of corporate executives. What is unusual about the Heritage team, unlike others, is that the students are often second-language learners; they come from apple orchards and hop fields; as freshmen they were often inarticulate and totally lacked confidence. Now they are eloquent, educated, and confident. Fortune 500 companies are knocking at their door to hire them. Education there is transformative. The Heritage team, moreover, this year finished third in the entire nation against the likes of Syracuse and other national universities; four times in the last decade they have finished in the final four.

I think of so many examples of success. Brenda, a Mexican-American high school dropout from a culture of poverty but with a baby and no plans for a future, was encouraged by a mentor to go back and get her GED and then go on to college. After graduating from Heritage she went on to corporate positions in the east and now is back in Washington managing the marketing for St Michelle Wineries in a part of the world. I think of similar stories of young people who came from

poverty and hold excellent positions at Costco or Walmart or another major company. Last weekend I gave a diploma to Haydee, one of the stars of the Enactus team with a great business career ahead of her. Three years ago I could hardly have imagined that with faculty guidance and her own determination she would be such a confident, capable, and eloquent future leader. I think of Crystal, a Native American with a similar story who completed Heritage, then finished a masters at Gonzaga, and later served as my Chief of Staff. Finally I lost her because she wanted to return to the Yakama Nation and help her people by taking a position managing its real estate purchases and sales. Now she is pursuing a doctoral degree as well. I think of Haver Jim, who just received his diploma. He is about 43 years old and entered several years ago with the not uncommon Indian suspicions of white man's education (they sent my daddy to boarding school, destroyed our culture, would not let us use our language) and became a very important part of the campus culture. He is bringing many skills back to his people as a leader. I have in my iPad essays by a Native American and a Mexican American student just graduating with the assistance of TRIO tutors. Both of them fought through youths in a culture of poverty, drugs, gangs, and low expectations. Both are graduating with honors and going on to a good job or graduate school.

The cultures are very different, and they have not always played nicely in the sandbox together. The Native American population at times has thought they were having a second colonial invasion—first the Anglos, now the Mexicans. The Yakama were traditionally a fishing population and hunters and gatherers. The Mexican population there has been largely agricultural. That leads to very different notions about water usage. Cultural practices differ. The Heritage campus is one of the few places in the region where the Mexican, Yakama, and white (the population with most of the wealth) can actually come together in civil discourse; and for many reasons the intercultural relations are better now than they used to be.

Our Native American students, like the Yakama adults, have a deep reserve that non-Indians may take a long time to appreciate. It can take a long time to build up trust. More than any other group they can benefit in the first year from a cohort approach in which students take classes together and build up mutual confidence and a mutual support group. The Native students often, moreover, believe they have to miss class, for example, for a family funeral that may last a week. Faculty members have a hard time figuring out how to balance academic and cultural values with these students. If a faculty and administration have patience, however, they can build strong partnerships over time with their Native populations.

I mentioned earlier the distrust many people in the older generation of Indians feel toward western education. There is a strong younger group, however, in their 30s or early 40s who want to retain many values of their elders but understand the need for a 21st century education to help the tribe be successful. They have a greater sense of oneness, wholeness, with their land and environment than other peoples do; but they insist on good science and relevant technology. They are very community-focused, interested in the common good more than individualistic goods, but they can be excellent businessmen and women.

Our Mexican-American students are very family focused. This does not mean the Yakama people are not, although the term “family” may have a fuzzier definition in our minds as they use it than it does for Mexicans. “My younger brother” is a term that may be meant seriously by an Indian but not refer to a blood tie, although family is important for both populations. For Mexican-Americans, though, getting belief within the family in the importance of education for youth will triple the likelihood of a young person completing high school and college. While some families are supportive, others see college interfering with putting meat on the family table. I also have to add that I have not yet seen a person from these cultures of poverty who escaped, and by that I mean completed high school and at least a 2-year college degree, without a mentor urging him or her forward. It might be a family member or teacher or just another supportive adult able to bring young people back to the right path and give them confidence in their potential.

What one finds in our Valley are young people who have been told all their life what they cannot do: “Your people don’t do that kind of thing” (become a doctor or scientist or engineer). We have students who were continually told “You are good with your hands, Juanita, so you might think about beauty school.” I have nothing against beauty schools, but we are talking about someone who turns out to have the ability to be a brain surgeon.

How much of what I am discussing is grounded in poverty rather than ethnic identity? A lot of it, to be sure, but nonetheless there is still a great deal of correlation between economic and ethnic indicators in America. African American populations have, of course, a longer and more complex historical context that others here will cover more thoroughly than I. Native Americans have a different but also specific and complex historical context and a Reservation culture that very much needs an educational partnership between tribal education, including tribal colleges, and sympathetic mainstream education.

The Hispanic challenge differs because of the rapid and widespread recent growth of the Latino population in the United States. In our region immigration, itself a complicating factor for better or worse, has been largely of low income and low education workers and their families, yet smart and talented people with enormous potential---and unlike middle-class American students no sense of entitlement that the world owes them everything. Their potential, and the wasted potential, reminds us all that unless we face the crisis of low expectations and underachievement in our K-12 world, higher education is never going to do all the things in America we would like it to.

There are surely financial issues to consider as well. We worry a lot about the cost of tuition and affordability, although surely there is as great a range in the market between Ivy League tuitions (which research shows are well worth it given lifetime earnings of graduates) and community college and local 4-year-public-college tuitions as there is between an Aston Martin and a Chevrolet. Often the more expensive the school the more financial aid is available, although in truth it is the middle-income student who gets blocked out of the well known private colleges: not wealthy enough to pay nor poor enough to get a big aid package.

Almost all students at Heritage who graduate do so without having a larger debt burden than the 25-30K range, manageable for most graduates to repay if not for those who have the burden but do not graduate.

I want to focus at the end, however, on one financial issue that hampers our Hispanic and Native students greatly but also HBCU students and poor white students. That results from the number of pre-college or remedial courses they must take to come up to the level of the Math 101 or English 101 college-level course. They use their Pell grant and state need-based grants to pay for these courses as well as others, but these courses do not count toward graduation because they are beneath college level. When these students become juniors and seniors they find they have run out of their financial aid, and their university may not have the resources to cover everything with institutional funds. Heritage may be unusual as a 4-year school in the large percentage of its students facing this crisis. Most such students may well be in 2-year colleges where they will not use up four years of funding; but they will face a crisis if they transfer later for a bachelors degree. Some national or state strategies will be needed to help students reach college-level coursework without a major risk to their future.