

# The Tribal Library Project: Interns, American Indians, and library services

## A look at the challenges

by Bonnie Biggs

A pilot project, which placed library school interns in tribal libraries on small American Indian reservations, presented unique learning experiences, challenges, and triumphs.

California's San Diego County is distinguished by the fact that it has more American Indian reservations than any other county in the United States. While the reservations are small, both in terms of population and land mass, several tribal libraries have been developed over the past 12 years either through individual tribal initiatives or under an LSCA grant awarded to the San Diego County Library for the Indian Library Services Project (ILSP) from 1987 through 1989.<sup>1</sup>

### Building bridges

California State University (CSU) San Marcos, an eight-year-old institution, began developing relationships with local American Indian reservations early on. Linkages began through outreach activities that were centered in the library and initiated by a professor of American Indian Studies and me. As the ILSP funds dried up, we began a series of initiatives to pick up where the San Diego County Library project left off.

American Indian Storytellings, staged in the small, one-room-library, drew large crowds and in less than two years the event evolved into an American Indian Cultural

Fair, drawing thousands of American Indians and surrounding community members to the fledgling campus. By the time the new university moved to its permanent 303-acre site, a formal American Indian Pow Wow, complete with traditional protocol, was staged, featuring the Indian Studies professor as Master of Ceremonies and myself as chair of the campus-wide Pow Wow Committee. The fourth annual event, celebrated in October 1996, drew nearly 10,000 people to the campus.

The level of commitment demonstrated through the staging of these events and the involvement of the local Indian community paved the way for me to develop ties with the half-dozen tribal libraries that survived the drying up of LSCA funding. Some libraries closed or remained open—based on the availability of volunteer staff. A small number remain vital, functioning institutions. Those affiliated with the gaming tribes flourish.

A few others struggle to survive as they compete with critical survival services such as water, fire, and police protection. The poverty rate is as high as the junior high school drop out rate and a commensurate illiteracy rate. The fact that any tribal libraries exist under such harsh conditions is a testament to the Indian people who support them in the face of uncompromising odds.

### About the author

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## Reaching out

I developed the Tribal Libraries Project in order to assist the valiant efforts of tribal library staff at the Rincon and Pala reservation libraries, situated in northern San Diego County and within 45 miles of the university. The project involved library school interns who worked, under my general supervision, in the tribal libraries doing work that tribal library staff identified as important. The project called for considerable professional oversight and cultural sensitivity, since it had taken me nearly seven years to make inroads with the local native people.

It was critical for the interns to learn that the mission, operation, and internal perception of a tribal library was markedly different from libraries in the macro-culture. The emphasis on collecting tribal material, preservation of language, and culture are only a few of the differences between the two. Tribal libraries tend to serve as social gathering places or in some cases, as museums, even as wake rooms.

Patterson and Taylor note, in a recent *College & Research Libraries* article on tribally controlled community college libraries, that the philosophy of the libraries "reflect their integration with, and dedication to the improvement of, the tribal community at large."<sup>2</sup> Tribal libraries that serve the general or tribal population at large also take a more holistic perspective on the concept of libraries in terms of place and service. The Indian value that places the good of the many before individual need is alive and operational in most tribal libraries.

I contacted the associate director of the San Jose State University, Southern California Campus (Fullerton) for the Masters in Library & Information Science to inquire about the feasibility of placing interns in tribal libraries.<sup>3</sup> The practicum course offered by the program suited the objectives of the tribal libraries project. The Southern California campus wanted to ensure that interns were not just used as "free workers" but rather wanted to place them in situations that would offer a substantive learning experience. The associate director thought it was a good idea and posted an announcement in the student newsletter. A student enrolled in the program contacted me in early 1995 and expressed great interest in the project.

## On the job challenges

The intern began working at the Rincon tribal library in the summer of 1995. The Rincon reservation is located in north central San Diego County and comprises eight square miles of green valley and foothills with spectacular mountain views. The on-reservation population is 1,600 with 651 of those being enrolled band members of the San Luiseño Band of Mission Indians. The Luiseño derived their name from their association with the Mission San Luis Rey, established in 1798 by Franciscan Fathers. The tribal library was established within the Rincon Tribal Hall under the ILSP in 1987. Since that time the library has seen four library managers come and go, has changed tribal councils ten times, and tribal administrators three times. The never-ending battle between the U.S. government and Indian tribes over sovereignty and economic independence issues renders reservation political climates unpredictable at best. In the spring of 1995 the Rincon library and its staff were stable.

I met with the intern, visited the tribal library to introduce her to tribal hall staff and the library manager, and left her to work out the details of her assignments with the library manager. During that summer, the Rincon reservation opened its casino, which featured 400 video gaming machines. Continuing litigation in the state and federal courts over the legality of video gambling jeopardized the casino's future but did not influence the tribe's decision, rooted in their concept of sovereign status, to install the machines and open the casino.

On the day the intern arrived for her first day of work, the tribal library manager informed her that he had to leave to videotape the opening of the casino and the expected arrest of tribal elders. U.S. Attorney, Alan Bersin had gotten wind of the machines via a *San Diego Union Tribune* photo, illustrating their installation. The intern was unable to work with the library manager that day and she began to understand how the complexity of tribal politics takes precedence over daily operations of any agency on the reservation. A federal order, prohibiting the use of the video machines, was imposed and the casino's business began a fast decline. Later that summer, all tribal staff

hours were reduced and some staff were laid off. The tribal library manager was unable to interact consistently with the intern and eventually left the reservation. The practicum was uneven at best.

### **Project expansion**

In the spring of 1996, the same intern responded to the ad for the Tribal Library Project in the library school program student newsletter and asked for the opportunity to enroll in the practicum again. She was still enthusiastic about the project and noted that some positive steps had been taken the previous summer. The project identified as most critical was to automate the collection, acquisition, and circulation functions of the tribal library. Working closely with the tribe, the intern helped to facilitate the decision to acquire and install InMagic software. Although the tribal library manager was not replaced, a part-time library staff member remained at Rincon and

a deal was struck with the tribal administrator to allow intern access.

During 1995–96 I established ties with a recently opened tribal library, five miles from Rincon, at the Pala reservation. The Pala reservation, also situated in north central San Diego County, is similar in size and, while inhabited by some Luiseño people, the majority of the people in Pala are descendants of the Cupeño people, relocated by the federal government in 1902 from nearby Warner Hot Springs. The Pala library was not one of the libraries established under the ILSP but rather by tribal initiative in 1989. The library manager, a Luiseño woman, was very established, enrolled in a local library technology certificate program, and was well regarded by the tribal council members—even though she came from another nearby reservation and was not Cupeño. The site was perfect for intern placement because of its stability, proximity to Rincon, and the desire on the part of the library manager to purchase InMagic, as well.

## **If you're considering a tribal library internship . . .**

Developing internships in tribal libraries can provide life-changing experiences for students entering the profession. The student benefits by experiencing a degree of cultural immersion and by contributing to the operational goals of the tribal library. Most importantly, the student gains a broader perspective of libraries and how they differ, in particular, how tribal libraries serve as social gathering places as well as centers for the oral transmission of knowledge and mythology.

Interested in developing a similar project in your library's service area? Here are some things to consider:

- **Is there an MLS degree-granting institution in your service area?** If there is, you'll want to find out if the curriculum includes internship opportunities, and, if so, how the supervisory role is defined. Other than the tribal library manager, someone will need to assume overall responsibility and be the liaison between the library school and the tribal library.

- **Is there an Indian reservation or sizable Indian population in your**

**library's service area?** If so, you'll want to make contact with the governing body, likely a tribal council, to determine if there is a tribal library. If so, you'll want to begin to connect with the tribal library staff and tribal council to determine their interest in an intern program. You'll want to spend most of your time, perhaps several visits, listening.

- **Ask yourself why you and your institution would want to pursue this kind of program in the first place.** Beyond altruism, does your campus/library hold a strong commitment to community outreach? Are there compelling, mission-based reasons for engaging in projects that center on multicultural issues? Is there someone within the library whose job description or research focus naturally links them to this kind of activity? If so, will the library administration support the time commitment required to develop and then oversee an intern program?

For further information about a successful tribal libraries internship project, contact Bonnie Biggs at [bbiggs@mailhost1.csusm.edu](mailto:bbiggs@mailhost1.csusm.edu) or call (760) 750-4337.

I met with two interns at the university in May 1996 to go over tribal histories, politics, and culture and to give an overview of the university's relationship to date with the two reservations. The interns exhibited curiosity and genuine interest in the project and agreed to split their practicum time (135 hours) between the two tribal libraries. Over the summer, the two interns proved to be perfect cultural ambassadors for both their library school and CSU-San Marcos. They ran into some difficult situations at Rincon given the instability of personnel caused by the casino shutdown. By late summer they turned their attention to Pala, where they had the opportunity to assist the tribe in drafting a proposal to the Department of Education for the

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Library Services For Indian Tribes and Hawaiian Natives Program Special Projects Grants. The proposal was geared toward helping to furnish and equip a new 3,600-square-foot-HUD-funded library. They participated in a Cupa Cultural Days event, ate their first fry bread, and adopted two starving and wounded "rez dogs." Using a Cupeño dictionary, the new "library dogs" were given Cupeño names, food dishes, and weekly treats. They embraced these pleasant experiences at Pala with enthusiasm and grace. The interns kept daily journals documenting the life-changing experience they had on the two reservations.

### **Mission accomplished**

Both tribal libraries have systems up and running. During this internship experience, a considerable number of titles were entered, tribal library staff were trained in the operation of InMagic, and user manuals were developed. In fall of 1996, the two interns joined me and the associate director of the CSU Fullerton MLS program at the annual conference of the California Library Asso-

ciation. The program entitled "The Tribal Library Intern Project" was a well-attended, successful presentation. Neither intern had ever presented at a professional conference before, but each came alive and delivered a stirring account when telling their stories to a room full of interested professionals.

The Tribal Library Project is alive and well. I continue to work with interns at the Pala tribal library, which was awarded the DOE grant in the fall of 1997. Ground-breaking took place in November, and the Pala library manager is (with the help of reservation high school students) moving from the old, run-down trailer into the new building.

### **Why?**

Beyond the obvious benefits to the tribal libraries and to the learning experiences of the interns, the Tribal Library Project serves as a living example of how two institutions of higher learning can pool human resources to achieve higher goals and to honor their respective institutional mission statements. In the case of CSU-San Marcos, the project embodies the campus mission: "CSU San Marcos endorses an international perspective that addresses the global community in its distinctive social, political, and economic terms. This multicultural outlook is reflected in our curriculum, extracurricular activities, international exchanges, and special programs that focus on world issues and problems." Indian reservations are sovereign nations. As we work together, we are in a sense working "inter-nationally."

### **Notes**

1. Bonnie Biggs & David Whitehorse, "Sovereignty, Collaboration and Continuing Challenge: A History of Tribal Libraries in San Diego County," *Special Libraries* 86 (Fall 1995): 279-291.

2. Lotsee Patterson and Rhonda Harris Taylor, "Trially Controlled Community College Libraries: A Paradigm for Survival," *College and Research Libraries* 57 (July 1996): 316-329.

3. The author would like to acknowledge Nancy Burns, Cindy Mediavilla, and Debra Hansen, CSU Fullerton; Kim Laru and Sarah Way, interns from CSU Fullerton; tribal library staff Doretta Musick, Mark Macarro, and Patrick Viveros for their commitment to this project and to David Whitehorse for the initial inspiration to make a move. ■