

*Alaska Native Political Leadership and Higher Education: One University, Two Universes.* By Michael L. Jennings. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2004. 224 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

Michael Jennings' book *Alaska Native Political Leadership and Higher Education* fills an important gap in the literature on Alaska Natives and education. While there are many publications addressing the American Indian experience in higher education, few of these books focus in on the unique experience of Alaska Natives within the broader work, and Jennings is the only contemporary author telling the story of the University of Alaska (UA) system and Alaska Natives in such detail. He presents a disturbing and cautionary tale of a university system systematically thwarting and undermining the efforts of indigenous students, educators and communities to make higher education relevant and responsive to their needs.

Jennings' main argument is that there are fundamental differences between the worldviews and cultures of Alaska Natives and Alaska's institutions of higher education, and these differences create conflicts and prevent the universities from meeting the needs of Natives and their communities. He explains why Native worldviews inherently conflict with those of Western higher education institutions, and offers multiple examples of these conflicts both at the urban campuses of the University of Alaska system, in particular at Fairbanks and Anchorage, and the rural two-year campuses that are now part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). Whether the immediate issue is creating the Native Student Services office in Anchorage, hiring a vice president of rural affairs for the UA system, or

making the rural colleges responsive to local Natives' interests and needs, the result seems to be the same: Native students and communities at best get only some of what they asked for, and at worst are treated with disrespect and end up with little or no satisfaction.

Jennings ascribes the universities' failure to respond to Native initiatives to their "unwillingness or inability to recognize the nature and validity of a Native worldview" (p. 7). Instead they react from a "Western understanding of educational structures and goals" (p. 7-8). He argues that only when the university bases its change initiatives on Alaska Natives' worldview will Natives needs be met.

Jennings tries to elucidate how the culture and traditions of Western educational institutions differ fundamentally from Native worldviews and beliefs. He focuses especially on how ties to and understandings of the land are central to Native identity, as well as detailing differences in Native and Western practices and beliefs around governance, social life and social control, and education. Unfortunately, this discussion, comprising the bulk of the second chapter, is more theoretical than grounded, and becomes very difficult to follow. There seems to be a tension in the book between presenting a history of and perspective on the UA system's relationship with Alaska Natives, that is intended to improve postsecondary education policymaking in Alaska, and building theory on why Western institutional perspectives conflict with Native worldviews. In trying to attain both objectives, Jennings is not entirely successful in achieving either. It would be far easier to grasp the theoretical arguments if they were more clearly tied to the central story of the University of Alaska's failures around Alaska Native education. Indeed, this book would be much stronger if Jennings first presented the story of the University of

Alaska systems' failure to meet the needs of the Native community, and then brought in the theoretical framework to explain the ongoing conflict and UA's resistance to change.

There are a number of weaknesses in this work. In the third chapter Jennings provides an overview of some of the key events in the since westerners came to Alaska, including the rise of the contemporary Alaska Native leadership in the Twentieth Century. However, this history is not explicitly linked to the main discussion of the higher education system, and the reader is left to make the connections between this history, the theoretical frameworks presented, and the story of the university systems' interactions with Natives in the remainder of the book. Indeed, in several places in the second half of the book Jennings alludes to the centrality of land claims and subsistence rights in understanding Native responses to the universities, but these links are never made clear.

Jennings's definition of "the" Native leadership in Alaska is very narrow, and his choice of interviewees reflects this. He appears to define "the" Native leadership as those men who have risen to positions of power within the Native corporation structure. There are multiple ways in which leadership can be defined in Native communities, from village council and tribal government members to leaders of non-profit and government agencies and elders from respected families. This broad definition of leadership is not reflected in Jennings' choice of respondents, and this oversight may have led to a somewhat biased interpretation of the university's actions or purpose, as it is seen through the eyes of only one slice of Alaska Native leadership.

The most noticeable manifestation of this limited perspective comes in Jennings's failure to include any women among his primary informants. When Jennings conducted his interviews, in 1990, there were a number of prominent women involved in Alaska Native politics and education. While not all had leadership roles on the Board of Regents or in Native corporations at that point in time, they were and continue to be influential as leaders in the Native community today. Among these are Janie Leask, who served as president of the Alaska Federation of Natives in the 1980s, Dr. Edna Ahgeak MacLean, current president of Ilisagvik College and 1989 Alaska Native Educator of the year, and Dr. Rosita Worl, who was a Sealaska Native Corporation Board member from the late 1980s through the 1990s. Jennings also talks extensively about two Native women in higher education in particular, Mary Reeve and Elaine Abraham, but did not select either of them as a primary interview subjects. Moreover, in general, Alaska Native women have been more successful in higher education than men. According to the 1990 Census, of Alaska Natives age 25 and older, 24.5% of females had completed 1-3 years of college, and 5.5% had completed 4 or more years, while only 20% of males had 1-3 years of college, and only 2.6% had finished 4 or more years. That gap has continued into the 2000 census. It is quite possible that, had he included women's voices more systematically, Jennings may have developed a different perspective on some of the issues he addresses.

Also, some of the assertions he makes are based on out-of-date understandings of education theory and practice. For example, in discussing educational leadership theory, Jennings argues that schools are organized into systems of defined rules and formal authority, with centralization of control, as promoted in modern scientific management

theory. He cites David Tyack and others from the 1960s and 1970s, and ignores leading theorists from the past two decades, like Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves, whose work has moved educational leadership theory and practice in exactly the opposite direction. Moreover, when he argues that the pursuit of indigenous ways of knowing is not considered an appropriate academic endeavor, he ignores the success of the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, a federally –funded, multi-million dollar initiative “designed to serve as a resource for compiling and exchanging information related to Alaska Native knowledge systems and ways of knowing” ([www.ankn.uaf.edu](http://www.ankn.uaf.edu)).

Factual errors in the text also detract from the important points Jennings makes. For instance as he discusses the history of the K-12 system for Natives and non-Natives in the early part of the twentieth century, it sounds as though all schools statewide were segregated. While indeed there were two systems of schooling in the Alaskan territory, a Federal system only for Natives and a territorial one primarily for white students, there were in fact more Native students enrolled in territorial schools than in Federal schools. In several instances he also leaves the reader hanging. For example at the end of chapter 5 he alludes to the central importance of the subsistence issue in reunifying and energizing the “Bush Caucus,” comprised of the Native, rural members of the Alaska State Legislature, and then fails to pick up this thread in the remainder of the book.

The University of Alaska system continues to struggle with the issues that Jennings highlights. There are still only a handful of Native faculty members across the campuses, no Alaska Studies majors, and low numbers of Native students completing their bachelor

degrees and seeking a graduate education. It is thus vital that policy makers and educators in Alaska understand both the history and the central arguments presented by Jennings. The main story of this work is compelling; hopefully the limitations will not discourage readers from getting to the heart of it.

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