



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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### BACKGROUND HISTORY

The Aboriginal Community College was established within Torrens C.A.E. as a direct result of a repeated request from the Adelaide and wider South Australian Aboriginal community for adult education. Several years of negotiations and planning culminated in the establishment of the College of Aboriginal Education which accepted the first intake of students in 1973. Thus, the College was designed to serve the perceived needs of the Aboriginal community. It did not observe and analyse the community and then dictate courses and structures which it decided the community ought to have or "needed". Community needs were stipulated by the community, and the prime understanding was that the voice of the community should guide the College's operations both through representation on the Management Committee and through internal individual control of learning programs. The College, then, was to cater for the changing perceived needs of the Aboriginal community through individually structured learning areas and processes. In 1975 the College was re-sited in its present premises at 72 Brougham Place, North Adelaide.

### PURPOSE OF THE COLLEGE

The College operates to meet the perceived educational needs of the Aboriginal community and individuals within that community through areas which are meaningful to them. The general aim, therefore, is to provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to begin or continue their education through the pursuit of individual educational programs which will enable the students to prepare themselves for more satisfying involvement in their communities through more satisfying employment and other activities. The original bridging function is only part of the College's activities, but the concept persists of a bridge between a past and a more satisfying and more meaningful

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\* David Williams has worked as a teacher/counsellor at the College since 1975. He is the longest serving full time member of the teaching staff.

future. Such breadth of function must be maintained to allow the principle of response to community and personal development to continue without prescribing the role of the College. Enrolment is open to all Aboriginal people (generally over 18 years except in the case of the P.V.T.U. - see later notes) who wish to embark upon such a program and to whom other relevant educational facilities are not available, or in which expectation of completion or success at the present time is not realistic.

#### UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY AND AIMS

The major enduring theme of the College's operations is the establishment or reinforcement of individual and group pride in identity as Aboriginal people. It is held that if a person holds views of negative self-esteem, feels worthless, oppressed and powerless, then any educational development must be restricted. The College, through its programs, endeavours to foster or reinforce self-respect, pride in and understanding of social and ethnic origins, confidence or powerfulness in being able to determine and achieve some life goals, understanding and awareness of the structures of life as it is, and some definition of personal, vocational and social aspirations in all students. It is accepted that individual adults require independence and self-management along with personal autonomy in the construction of learning, social and vocational activities. The emotional needs, problems and adult responsibilities which will be encountered in the pursuit of such a level of operation will require priority over academic involvement - the affective will generally take precedence over the cognitive. That is not to suggest that the academic content of the College's programs is regarded as unimportant or irrelevant : this is a misinterpretation which has, on occasions, been erroneously perceived by those who are unfamiliar with the internal processes of the College. The development of personal, academic and vocational skills are of vital importance : they comprise the prime reason for students entering the College but, in keeping with some of the most fundamental educational philosophies, it is believed that the pursuit of such skills cannot be fully effective if students are unable to give studies their full attention because of personal, domestic, legal, financial and other pressures which affect the functioning of the self.

Unquestionably the majority of these problems are directly connected with the societal position of Aborigines as a severely oppressed, alienated and "powerless" group. This oppression has been psychologically internalised and individualised to the extent that Aboriginal people are subjected from within and without to an

enervating degree of "person-centred delinquency", (a term used to describe the situation where a person is held responsible for problems which did not arise from any action undertaken by that person and over which he/she has little or no control). The development of a wider understanding and awareness of the structure and function of the wider Euro-Australian society is essential in countering the negative forces imposed on Aborigines. At an individual level the acquisition and implementation of self-discipline and adult responsibility is critical.

It is believed that no one person is intrinsically better or more worthy of respect than any other person regardless of education, experience, status or position. All students must be accepted with "unconditional positive regard" to enable them to facilitate positive personal growth and academic and vocational progress.

Briefly then, the underlying aim of the College is to enable and encourage adult Aboriginal students to set a series of goals and chart a course towards the realisation of these goals via personal, academic and vocational skills development. In practical terms students with a variety of goals can enrol at the College on the understanding that they meet the basic entry criteria and that the College has facilities and expertise to enable them to strive for their goals. So, it is common to find in any intake such a variety of goals as a fishing vessel skipper, field worker, self-employed people, those going on to further study, those learning English as a second language, those who wish to generally upgrade their education, and those who, on entry, are unclear of their aims other than wanting to "do something better" or to help their own people. Programs are constructed to meet individual needs as far as possible, but there is, ultimately, a limit to the resources and capabilities of the College so there is a set of constraints which determine the maximum extent of flexibility of programs.

## PRESENT PROGRAMS

Programs are constructed to meet the needs of each intake. It is possible, therefore, to have different programs available in different years. The programs available this year are fairly typical of the College's operations:

### 1. COMPREHENSIVE STUDIES

This program adopts a first term smorgasbord approach, providing students with as many learning experiences as possible to sample,

analyse and evaluate. From the sampling period onwards feedback in academic counselling sessions allows students to construct individual timetables geared to meet their own needs, vocational aspirations and interests. While there is a gradual homing-in on needs and hence a contracted timetable which allows concentration on priorities, a certain element of experimenting and sampling new experiences is retained throughout most of this program. As far as possible, students follow individualised courses in the classroom situation which enable them to work at a personally challenging but attainable academic level. However, there are some subjects which are handled mainly as class lessons with the whole group handling the same content and level : in this case the level of response is expected to reflect academic ability. There are many occasions on which the students in this program combine for lessons with students from other programs. Participation in this program, as in all others, is determined by needs *not* academic ability or previous school or work experience. This is the College program with the largest intake and is usually restricted to new enrolments.

## 2. SPECIFIC STUDIES

The students who undertake this course are those who are sufficiently stable within themselves and their lifestyles and who have a specific reason for coming to the College, perhaps to reach a certain level of certification, or to study for a definite vocational goal. They are students who are clear and determined about specific learning experiences which they wish to gain from the College - there is little or no need for them to sample widely other learning experiences or to experiment. They do not necessarily possess higher academic ability or experience than members of other groups. This year there are three component parts to the Specific Studies Program:

- a) *Academic Group* - a number of students who are pursuing a course of mainly academic study to gain a level of certification or particular academic skills required for future goals. Examples include two people studying for a Skipper's Certificate, five people preparing for entry to further academic courses and one person preparing for self-employment. Some students are new enrolments while others will have completed the Comprehensive Studies Program.
- b) *Project Group* - a number of students who have completed the Comprehensive Studies Program and who are now following largely practical projects through which they will gain skills necessary for future vocational aims. Many of the projects are designed to provide opportunities for self-employment, should employment

by organisations and departments be unavailable, and at the beginning of the year were based on, among others, leatherwork, photography, establishing an Aboriginal kindergarten, and establishing an alcohol counselling unit.

- c) *E.S.L. Group* - a group of students from traditionally-oriented communities whose main aim is to generally improve education especially in the use of English as a second language and their understanding of Euro-Australian society. It is also expected that these students will learn other skills of value in their home communities. There is often a large amount of overlap with the Comprehensive Studies Program in experiential areas of learning.

### 3. PRE-VOCATIONAL TRAINING UNIT

This program first operated in 1977 as a direct result of the College's policy of responding to the Aboriginal community's perceived needs. The community felt that there was a need for a program of intensive preparation for employment for Aboriginal youths, and that while facilities were offered elsewhere they did not sufficiently cater for the position of Aboriginal people in society and their special needs. The program enrolls Aboriginal youths aged 15-17 in an intensive course of study of practical and academic skills required for future employment particularly in trade areas and, where possible, in apprenticeships. Considering the drastically contracting employment prospects in such areas the results gained by the Unit have been outstandingly good and have provided a source of encouragement and hope within the Aboriginal community.

### 4. ABORIGINAL STUDIES TEACHING AND RESOURCE UNIT

The major purpose of this section of the College is to educate the non-Aboriginal community in the special characteristics and requirements of Aboriginal life. Visits are arranged to clubs, church groups, schools, colleges etc. to demonstrate aspects of the whole range of Aboriginal lifestyles in the belief that knowledge will help create a more understanding and rational attitude towards Aboriginal people in this and future generations. A curriculum development function of the unit is to review and prepare materials about Aboriginal life, give guidance and assistance to teachers preparing Aboriginal Studies courses, and liaise with other organisations involved in Aboriginal studies generally. The staff of this unit are also involved in teaching in general college programs as the unit is very much an integral part of the whole College.

## 5. PART-TIME CLASSES

Part-time classes are organised to meet community needs where those involved cannot enrol full time in College courses. Sometimes those courses assist people who are in employment but wish to upgrade certain skills, or can be of a general educational nature. This year the classes planned on a part-time basis include report writing, craft subjects, audio-visual training, remedial work and general classes for Aboriginal school children.

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Members of the Aboriginal community are constantly involved formally and informally, individually and organisationally, in the operations of the College. However, the most formal involvement is through the Management Committee of the College which has had a majority of Aboriginal members since 1973. The members are representatives of various Aboriginal organisations and departments and via those representatives the community effectively controls those areas for which the Management Committee has responsibility. Refinements are presently being considered which would ensure that the general community members have an even more effective say in the College's operations. This unique aspect of the College is the one which must be most jealously guarded when the College's future is being considered.

The College is also seen as a focal point for many community activities, social, political and educational. Projects which have started from within the College and, in some cases, moved outside, include the Nunga Football Club, the Nunga Band (which won 1st prize in the group section at the 1978 National Aboriginal Music Festival in Perth), Nunga Radio, and a scheme to provide entertainment for isolated communities in northern South Australia. The constant factor is that the College has provided facilities and support for Aboriginal community incentive.

## THE FUTURE

The College's greatest need for the future is security. Three evaluations so far completed (the fourth is almost complete at the time of writing) have all stressed that the College is being largely successful in achieving its aims. Continued community support verifies this, yet the College is still housed in temporary and totally unsuitable buildings with poor facilities and a lack of resources, and is still offered unsuitable funding arrangements. The air of

insecurity and impermanence which pervades the College not only helps explain some of the problems which have been encountered but also makes its performance even more remarkable. Innumerable plans and promises have been forwarded but, in effect, little has changed. However, the College has persevered and prospered and, hopefully, will be given the opportunity to continue to do so in the future in an environment which more appropriately befits its function and the Aboriginal community which it serves.

*(The brevity of this article cannot sufficiently describe the Aboriginal Community College. Further information is available from - The Principal, P.O.Box 221, North Adelaide, S.A. 5006).*

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## APPLICATIONS FOR CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIPS

The Churchill Trust is now\* calling for applications from Australians, of 18 years and over, from all walks of life who wish to be considered for Churchill Fellowships tenable in 1982.

Completed application forms and reports from three referees must reach the Churchill Trust by 28 February 1982.

People wishing to be considered for a Churchill Fellowship should send their name and address NOW with the request for a copy of the Churchill Trust's Information Brochure and application forms to:

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (M)  
P.O. Box 478,  
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

or, for residents in South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory, the appropriate address below:

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (M)  
GPO Box 498, Adelaide, S.A., 5001  
PO Box 6209, Hay Street East, Perth, W.A. 6000  
GPO Box 1260N, Hobart, Tas., 7001  
PO Box 2147, Darwin, N.T. 5794

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\* In November and December 1980.