Elders:

Tradition keepers and teachers

Indian people prize the wisdom and knowledge of elders. Tribal elders earn respect not only because of their age, but through their practice of cultural traditions.

Tribal elders are often the only people in the world who possess the traditional knowledge of their culture. They know how to use certain plants medicinally, how to perform the rites and ceremonies that mark the important stages of life and how to help someone through a crisis. Equally important, they know the stories that have sustained their people for thousands of years.

Today, the Indian colleges often provide the only consistent link between the young and old as traditional methods of passing on wisdom have deteriorated for many reasons. Unlike the old days, children spend their time at school and other activities rather than at their grandparents' sides. Some elders have become wary of exposing their beliefs, disdained too often by the outside world. Because of their own experiences at mission and government boarding schools, where they were punished for speaking their tribal languages or practicing their traditions, elders often are afraid to teach their children and grandchildren. They never dreamed a time would come when Indian people would forget the old ways. Unfortunately, that time has come for many tribes.

At the Indian colleges, elders are seen as invaluable cultural resources and, therefore, play crucial roles. They are invited to teach classes in tribal language, history, oral literature, singing and drumming, canoe making, hide tanning, weaving, quill work and basketry. They serve as consultants, advising instructors and authenticating course materials. They offer prayers at graduation ceremonies. And sometimes they enroll as students themselves and find they are sought out as mentors and guides to students, faculty and administrators alike.

"Like the old redwood forests, when a mother tree falls, a young one springs from its death. I am one of the trees grown out of my grandmother's falling... The line where my grandmother ends and I begin is no line at all."

Linda Hogan, Chickasaw

A Circle of Nations

Right, Mary Little White Man, a student at Oglala Lakota College, with her grandmother Emily Little White Man