

American Indian Studies Department
Connections to the Mission

The American Indian Studies Department's commitment to diversity, community, and civic responsibility is grounded in the College's mission:

To nurture future leaders in service to the world by providing high quality educational opportunities, which are based in the liberal arts and shaped by the faith and values of the Christian church, by the context of a vital metropolitan setting, and by an intentionally diverse campus community.

We advance the mission of the college with various entities in mind, understanding that our concept of community includes not only Augsburg, but also Native American urban and reservation communities of Minnesota as well as Indigenous peoples in North and South America. These diverse populations join together through our liberal arts curriculum, our civic engagement, and our various programs, all of which are guided by our positioning as an American Indian Studies Department at Augsburg College. The department's ongoing attention to nurturing these groups includes ensuring that our program continues to meet their needs and remain global and trans-cultural in scope, while maintaining our focus in the liberal arts.

American Indian Studies as a discipline emerged from city settings; specifically it grew from civil rights movements in major metropolitan areas like Minneapolis. The American Indian Studies department carries on this tradition with the added goal of nurturing future leaders who understand the complexity and diversity of heritages, histories, and worldviews found in our metropolitan setting. Our department advocates for intentional diversity on campus by linking our classroom projects, service learning components, and our cultural programming to the larger Twin Cities populations; we use the city as our classroom. Two of our ongoing programs—the Native Writer's Series and the Native American Film Series—provide cross-community interaction and are open to all of Augsburg's family. In addition we provide day trips to the Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe's government center and museum, which are open to all at Augsburg. We also co-sponsor guest lecturers such as Cochise Anderson, Gary Clayton Anderson, Lori Arviso Alvord, and Sam Robertson who provide wide-ranging topics and opinions about Native American issues. Our students participate in off campus events and programs, attending art galleries and museums, community activities, and working with Native organizations and events. Access to Native leaders, artists, and communities opens a dialogical and participatory space for our students about various issues and worldviews. It is through these social interactions that students most lucidly conceptualize their own positioning within the world and their role as active agents in change.

Similarly, our professors model a philosophy of a multicultural worldview, which is imbedded into our curriculum and is at the heart of Augsburg's commitment to diversity and the city, by teaching through example. Our professors are engaged in work in the community: sitting on boards of non-profits, community organizations, and Indian programs; providing off-campus learning experiences to both Augsburg and non-Augsburg audiences; and creating bridges between the college and the Indian communities of Minnesota. We also work on campus with programs whose agendas are particularly attuned to issues of diversity and educational

opportunity, and to creating awareness about issues of social justice. As an American Indian Studies department in the city, we take our roles as educators to mean also acting as mentors and role models.

As American Indian Studies professors, we interpret our vocation to include helping educate students and people of various communities about American Indian peoples, cultures, histories, and philosophies. This often means that we must first deconstruct the stereotypes and assumptions both Native and non-Native people have of each other. We do this in various ways in the classroom, but we also do this in the community through bridge building projects and service learning programs. In a very real way, we act as models—both Native and non-Native—through education of the possibilities of a truly multicultural, egalitarian, and inclusive world. For example, our department models interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism—in a world that often “ethnicizes” particular programs of study through hiring, Augsburg’s AIS department welcomes diversity in the backgrounds of its professors, in its teaching practices, and in its ethnicities. Our Native and non-Native faculty also engage the Indian communities in various ways—each differently and in respect to their areas of focus—and are accepted by those communities for who they are. This is no small thing as it takes time, emotional energy, and consistency. Trust is not often found in the relationship between academia and Indian peoples due to a long history full of violence and racism in education.

Taking the college’s mission to heart, the American Indian Studies department works to bridge the gap caused by racism and violence through our interpretation of the liberal arts. While the concept of the liberal arts grew out of a Western European historical paradigm, American Indian Studies has expanded it to encompass equally important alternative worldviews and values. Thus, while it is in nature grounded in the philosophy of the Western liberal arts, it is also trans-cultural in its application of the concept. Our interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary major utilizes the pedagogical and methodological approaches of humanities, social sciences, and American Indian Studies in preparing our students to be “effective, informed, ethical” citizens of the world. We foster intellectual curiosity across cultural contexts through the lens of Native American world-views and humanities perspectives, which promote life-long learning. The major introduces students to cross-cultural influences, art, music, and language as they are embedded in American Indian culture, and in the relationship between Native peoples and American or “Western European” culture in regard to human rights, land, reservation and urban issues. At each level and across courses, the major creates a theoretical arena in which students move between Western and Native American theoretical approaches to history, philosophical thought, cultural products, and world-view, enabling students to develop critical insight into cultural diversity, the process of colonialism and historical change, and their own placement within the social systems that influence contemporary Native America. The major also provides inter-active learning based on these areas and issues in the form of cultural engagements and travel seminars that immerse students in Native American histories, arts, community events, and religious philosophies.

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