

Indian college waging fight for artists

By Gwen Dambrofsky

REGINA (CP) — Dennis Acoose is determined not to let native Indian culture wither away, overpowered by concerns about jobs, money in the bank and land-claim disputes.

If he and his colleagues at the Indian Federated College on the University of Regina campus have their way, within the next few years students will be able to earn a degree in performing arts.

The college, with a full-time enrolment of 320 students, already has a visual arts section, along with management, social work and Indian studies programs.

Acoose, vice-president of finance and administration, says that in the early 1970s Indian artists began to gain a strong national profile, which led to the development of an Indian visual arts program at Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College in Saskatoon.

"From there, there was a consensus among Indian leaders that such a program should continue on at the university level," he says.

The visual arts program at the college is well attended, not only by students seeking a BA in Indian art, but also by students majoring in other programs who take one or two art classes.

The idea for a performing arts program began to germinate in 1972 when the Saskatchewan Federation of Indians played host to the Royal Assembly of First Nations.

Indigenous groups from around the world brought their performing artists to the conference and talked about the need for university programming to encourage the development of young Indian actors, singers and dancers, Acoose says.

But throughout the next decade, the idea began to fade as Indian leaders became preoccupied with social and economic issues.

Even today, Acoose concedes it won't be easy to convince native organizations of the importance of establishing a performing arts program.

"There are certain Indian people who feel that retaining our own culture is vitally important," he says. "But in some cases, the priority of Indian people is elsewhere, such as economic development.

"On a scale of one to 10, Indian performing arts may be a two."

But Acoose and his colleagues are convinced a performing arts program can be just as successful as the visual arts section has



Bob Boyer (left) and Dennis Acoose of the Indian Federated College display a buffalo hide donated by artist Gerald Red Elk of Fort Peck, Mont.

—CP laserphoto

proved to be. Having begun drafting the logistics of the program, they are willing to be patient and wait a couple of years if necessary to convince Indian leaders of the proposal's worth.

Acoose says that currently, instructors at the college believe the program should approach contemporary performing arts with a native perspective. For example, drama courses might see students writing and producing plays on Indian history or on more timely issues concerning natives.

Traditional culture would also be an integral part of the program, with courses addressing the various aspects of the pow-wow from costume design to singing and the symbolism of the dance movements.

Acoose says the traditional courses will be the most difficult to set up because of "the sensitivity of the elders in knowing that what is being presented from a traditional aspect is proper in their eyes."

Bob Boyer is a pow-wow dancer and an associate professor at the college. He says the college does not want to encourage a separate Indian culture, but wants to see native art become part of the mainstream of Canadian society.

"We'd be crazy to try and duplicate what the drama department has, or the music department, or the film department," he says. "The intent is to go toward a program that deals with the philosophy and the history of natives as it would apply to the performing arts."

Although there have been some Indians, like Saskatchewan's Buffy Ste. Marie, who have excelled in the entertainment industry, Boyer says the barriers for native artists are still virtually insurmountable.

Boyer also says native performers are often constricted by the industry's insistence that Indian culture be kept separate.

"I don't think Shakespeare was concerned with whether people were white, pink or black," he says. "Most plays were not meant to be stereotyped for white people. Indians are consistently considered to be only capable of playing Indians, in the same way that blacks can only play blacks."