At the very heart of the matter, all things Dakota represent a wholeness and health of body, mind, and spirit. This defines Cankdeska Cikana Community College (CCCC, Fort Totten, ND), which is a living, breathing celebration of everything Dakota.

The college’s namesake, World War II veteran Paul Yankton, Sr.—whose Dakota name Cankdeska Cikana means Little Hoop—believed in self-responsibility and the need for educational opportunities. CCCC helps the Dakota people realize his vision.

The Dakota way is at once an attitude, an approach to life, and an expression of spirituality. Because it has often eluded description in the English language, the Dakota way has been misunderstood by generations of mainstream educators. Not only that, but they have dismissed Dakota and other Native people as primitive and tried to change their ways of life rather than offer genuine instruction.

Full of pride in the Dakota worldview and way of learning, educators at CCCC are changing that. President Cynthia Lindquist has unveiled the college’s new motto: “Think Dakota, Live Dakota.”

“We shape Western education methods to suit us, not the other way around,” she says. “We fit their box into our circle.”

By extolling traditional Dakota values, CCCC helps students find pride in their heritage. A legacy of forced dependence upon U.S. government policy has resulted in a kind of death by assimilation for Indian people, says Lindquist. Many succumb to a terrible sense of hopelessness. “Tribal colleges are changing that,” she says.

The Dakota have a long history of survival, resourcefulness, and resilience—and Lindquist believes that tribal colleges, and CCCC in particular, help students tap into that strong spirit.

At Cankdeska Cikana Community College, students learn healthy ways of living that maintain the balance represented by the sacred circle. Truly, this is the Dakota way.
The main entrance of the Cankdeska Cikana Community College building is deceptively humble. But this former Bureau of Indian Affairs school building stands as a testament to the tenacity and resilience of Cankdeska Cikana, the Spirit Lake Nation, and the Dakota people. With its well-tended exterior and plantings of flowers, it also hints at the opportunities and hope within its walls.

Before the college located there in 1984, the building hosted the reservation’s elementary and secondary schools. spare and institutional, its style is typical of 1960s Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) construction. But rather than demolish the building, college leaders renovated it as a way to honor and preserve its history. By recognizing past generations while planning for future students, the college also honors its namesake, Cankdeska Cikana.

The offices within the recently completed administrative wing serve as the central hub for the school’s infrastructure and ensure the institution’s firm foundation and longevity. The new area houses the president’s office, human resources department, the vice president of academic’s office, facility manager, and the business office staff.

Nearby, students use state of the art computer labs with access to online college courses and an Interactive Video Network that transmits science courses among North Dakota’s five tribal colleges. CCCC also maintains articulation and transfer agreements with other colleges within the North Dakota University System. This allows students to transfer easily to other institutions.

CCCC is home to a wealth of hands-on learning environments. Many programs support community efforts, services such as suicide prevention, diabetes education, Dakota language immersion, and traditional craft classes. There is also a Medicine Wheel Garden featuring Native medicinal plants, a working greenhouse, carpentry shop, and the reservation’s only public library with community Internet access.

Currently, students can earn Associate’s Degrees in Liberal Arts, Business Administration, Finish Carpentry, Carpentry, Automotive Technology, Natural Resource Management, Office Technology, and Pre-Nursing. Ever-evolving and growing, CCCC will soon offer its first four-year degree program, a Bachelor's Degree in Dakota Studies. Revitalizing the Dakota language is central to the college’s mission and the Dakota Studies program but also to the community as a whole.

Educators such as Dakota language instructor Lorraine Grey Bear believe that the key to the Dakota people’s spirituality and culture is contained within language. She has created language CDs for students and community members and regularly collaborates with elders on word lists and pronunciation.

The recent completion of the Early Childhood Learning Center and Gymnasium is another bold expression of CCCC’s commitment to a healthy mind, body, and spirit philosophy. Both facilities offer training opportunities for students and services to students, staff, and community members.

Clearly, the wisdom of the hoop, with its unbounded message of growth, has played a role in the success of this hardworking institution. Placed on accreditation probation in 2003 by the Higher Learning Commission, CCCC received a 10-year accreditation status from the same commission in 2005. Like a tenacious prairie plant, Cankdeska Cikana Community College has persisted and blossomed, a beautiful expression of its motto “Think Dakota, Live Dakota.”
At the center of Cankdeska Cikana Community College is a commitment to the interconnected health of body, mind, and spirit.

Lindquist believes that good health and a sense of well-being are essential for student success. She envisions CCCC as a safe, healthy place where students can learn, aspire, and question without fear.

The new gymnasium and Early Childhood Learning Center are the most recent examples of CCCC’s commitment to student and community health. Like many American Indian communities, the Spirit Lake Nation has high rates of diabetes, obesity, and related illnesses. To give students and community members the chance to reengage with their bodies, CCCC has built a gymnasium that features a regulation-size collegiate gym, running track, and fitness center.

The newly completed Early Childhood Learning Center holds a special place in Lindquist’s heart—and the entire community can be proud of it as a sacred children’s place. Looking around the center, which can serve up to 72 children, she smiles: “I can leave this world knowing that our babies can live and thrive in a quality, healthy environment while their parents accomplish education dreams.”

The commitment to healthy living is also exemplified by the greenhouse and gardens where students grow plants and vegetables that are sold and shared with the community. The college is also home to a Medicine Wheel Garden in which students grow and learn about medicinal and traditional Dakota plants.

“We want our students to have pride in themselves as people and as Dakota,” she says. “But first they must be healthy and well balanced in body as well as mind.”
Ensuring adequate funding for a tribal college is not a job for the faint of heart. “It requires constant diligence,” says President Lindquist.

Unlike mainstream institutions, tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) lack a tax base from which to draw money. Colleges receive federal funding via the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act, but the amount provided by Congress is discretionary. In fact, since 1978, the law has yet to provide the full promised amount per student. Currently, TCUs receive about $2,000 less per student than originally authorized.

But Lindquist credits U.S. Sen. Byron Dorgan, (D-ND), for gaining increased and forward funding for TCUs. “He has been our warrior,” she says.

At Cankdeska Cikana, administrators piece together funding from sources including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Education, BIA, and the Spirit Lake Nation. The American Indian College Fund also provides essential student scholarships. Since 85% of CCCC’s students live at or below the federal poverty level, the scholarships help in many ways.

The newly completed Early Childhood Learning Center also reflects the creativity and ingenuity of college leaders.

After winning initial funding from the Department of Education, college leaders asked the Spirit Lake Tribal Council to partner to provide childcare services. Since tribal employees, community members, and students all indicated that childcare was their greatest need, the partnership was approved. Additional partners included the Spirit Lake Employment and Training Program and Spirit Lake Casino and Resort.

Regardless of their specific responsibilities, all CCCC employees routinely pitch in when and where needed. College registrar Ermen Brown doubles as bus driver and maintenance person. Born and raised on the Spirit Lake reservation, Brown attended high school in the building during its tenure as a BIA school and later earned his associate of arts degree at CCCC. During a recent trip to Arizona for the American Indian Higher Education Consortium’s student conference, he spent the night digging the school’s bus out of heavy snow.

“Everyone here is willing to jump in and help out,” he says. “In the end, it is all about the students.”

CCCC also benefits North Dakota’s economy. Annually it contributes nearly $11 million to the state’s total economy. “Our ancestors taught us to do everything to the best of our abilities,” says Lindquist. “Our efforts at CCCC are helping to ensure that our future communities can live smart, healthy, and strong.”
Revolutionizing Education

The success stories of Cankdeska Cikana Community College students and alumni may appear modest at first glance. A closer look, however, reveals a series of personal revolutions that have saved many people’s lives. Chartered in 1974, CCCC has graduated 394 students since its first class graduated in 1977. Here are but a few stories of the crucial role this small institution has played in the careers and lives of its students and alumni.

Challsey Lawrence always knew she would work in the health care field. After all, her motivation lived very close to home. Disabled by strokes, her mother, Robin, depended on Challsey as her primary caregiver.

Attending CCCC allowed Challsey the freedom to run home and care for her mother whenever necessary. “It was a huge relief,” Challsey recalls. The supportive, family atmosphere at CCCC solidified Challsey’s commitment to contribute to the health and well being of her community. Her dream is to return to Spirit Lake and work in public health, going into people’s homes. “This will allow me to help people in a very direct way,” she says.

Challsey admits she experienced culture shock during her first semester at the University of North Dakota (UND). Culturally, she says, Dakota people are not encouraged to “stand out,” so it was difficult at first to speak publicly and ask questions. At CCCC, however, teachers nurtured her toward independence. “With such small class sizes and one-to-one attention,” she says, “they can tell immediately if you’re struggling.” At CCCC, she learned how to be herself. “Now,” she says, “I proudly introduce myself in class as a member of the Spirit Lake Nation.”

Currently in her final year at UND, she attends school with a clear mind, and nothing distracts her from her studies. “There is so much to see, learn, and experience in nursing,” she says.

Before returning home to work at Spirit Lake, Challsey hopes to work in a large hospital emergency room setting. “Getting that intense experience under my belt will help me when I get back home,” she predicts.

A recipient of the Indian Health Service’s RAIN (Recruitment/Retention of American Indians into Nursing) scholarship, she credits her family, especially her mother, for encouraging her. “My pride comes from my family,” she says. “Although they’re always teasing you, you know they love you.”

For Mardell Lewis, Cankdeska Cikana Community College is part of her “family tree.” Now the human resources director at the college, she recalls childhood visits to the office where her mother worked as the college’s first librarian. “It was never a question about where I would go to college,” she recalls.

While pursuing her bachelor’s degree and raising her two children, she worked as an administrative assistant at CCCC. Since then, she has transitioned into her current human resources role. There, she essentially created her own position and laid the groundwork for a functioning human resources department. Her great hope is that she might touch the lives of employees and students in the same way teachers inspired her. “I love CCCC,” she says. “It is part of my family.”
Rodney Martin seems always to be in constant, quiet motion. He is always busy in the background, tilling the college garden, driving a school bus, or moving tables in the college auditorium.

A visit to his small HUD home tucked away on a reservation cul de sac reveals more of this gentle man. Watching him hold court among his children brings to mind a benevolent Buddha. Like eager puppies, they swarm over him, vying for attention. Seven young voices sing “Dad,” at the same time and create a noisy chorus of questions and complaints. Martin, however, is nonplussed. He is the rock, the constant in their lives. His children represent a complex mix of relationships: Some are his biological children, some his stepchildren, some are his grandchildren, and one is adopted. Like so many Indian households, however, there is no distinction based on biology. He is simply “Dad.” And they are his children. He is committed to caring for them.

At age 47, Martin didn’t expect to have so many kids. “It just sort of happened,” he says. At CCCC, however, the smaller, more intimate classes gave her the courage to ask questions. She was among the first students to earn a bachelor of arts degree using the new Interactive Video Network technology to attend virtual classes at Turtle Mountain Community College. She hopes to begin working soon in early childhood development.

Brittany Brown, 21, is the first CCCC student to finish her associate’s degree within one year of high school graduation. After a short stint at North Dakota State University (NDSU, Fargo), she returned home to Spirit Lake and CCCC. Brittany found the large class size at NDSU intimidating. “I never would have dared to ask a question,” she says. At CCCC, however, the smaller, more intimate classes gave her the courage to ask questions. She was among the first students to earn a bachelor of arts degree using the new Interactive Video Network technology to attend virtual classes at Turtle Mountain Community College. She hopes to begin working soon in early childhood development.
Dr. Leander “Russ” McDonald appears as the epitome of the accomplished academic. Currently serving as the vice president of academics at CCCC, he is winner of a McNair scholarship (a federal program designed to increase graduate degrees for students from underrepresented segments of society) and former director of research at the University of North Dakota Resource Center on Native American Aging.

McDonald’s path to the academic world, however, is not the typical scholar’s story. He has firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by CCCC students.

His story is a hardscrabble journey of determination and personal triumph. Born and raised on the Spirit Lake reservation, he was taught to work hard. Prior to attending CCCC, he had always worked as a laborer, and at one time, pushed the soda pop cart inside the tribe’s casino. After finishing a stint in the Army, however, he returned home and enrolled in CCCC, driving a student van as part of a work-study program.

A self-described life of partying extended the normal two-year associate program to four years as he struggled with addiction. Fortunately, he made his way into a 12-step fellowship and reconnected with his Dakota culture while at CCCC. Soon, he found himself drawn to the discipline of sociology. “I didn’t know I even had a culture until I took a sociology class at CCCC,” he recalls. He realized that Dakota people possess a unique and distinct culture. He also began to see how the Dakota worldview—represented by the circle—can be integrated into lifestyle as well as education. CCCC’s “Think Dakota, Live Dakota” motto is a perfect example of this philosophy, he says.

Deeply committed to his culture, traditions, and language, he integrates Dakota spirituality and ways into his life, praying daily and seeking to live a good life as a Dakota man.

He also has many standout memories from his student days at CCCC. “They allowed me to return to school even after I messed up,” he says. “They gave me time to get caught up on my studies.” He recalls a math instructor who patiently allowed him to work on his homework on the classroom blackboard. “He allowed me to work and learn in my own way,” he says. “This reinforced my self esteem.” Looking back, McDonald is certain he would not have gotten such one-on-one attention in a mainstream college.

In the end, McDonald believes that the supportive, inclusive aspects of his culture will save Dakota and all Indian people. He is fiercely committed to integrating these ways into the fabric of CCCC. “If we don’t know who we are, we are losing our ties to our inner selves,” he says. “I succeed because I know who I am. If I didn’t believe that, I wouldn’t be here.”
Surrounded by her daughters and granddaughter at CCCC’s alumni reunion dinner and celebration, Gloria Jetty reflects upon her history with the college. Like so many on the Spirit Lake Reservation, her family’s life and destiny have been closely intertwined with CCCC. Jetty was 40 years old when she began her studies at what was then named Little Hoop Community College. Since then, three generations of her family have graduated from here.

Attending CCCC allowed her to continue working while also raising four daughters and nine sons. “At the time, I wanted to get a four-year degree but couldn’t afford it,” she says. Earning an associate’s degree helped her get a position as kindergarten teacher’s aide for social services. She still works full time as coordinator for the tribe’s Healthy Start Program. “Going to school is never easy,” she says. “Our young people need to realize that there are many opportunities right here close to home at CCCC.”

Her daughter Lynn Greene attests to the hard work college entails. “I worked, went to CCCC, and raised a family—all full-time,” she says. She finished her Associate’s Degrees in Liberal Arts and Accounting in two years. According to Greene, the college’s proximity makes it handy for cash-strapped reservation residents. “The college always took care of us,” she says, “We knew they would never let us go hungry.” It was quite a different story, however, when Greene earned her bachelor’s degree at Mayville State University: “It was so much more demanding and impersonal.”

She credits her CCCC experience—with its emphasis on Dakota language and culture—for helping her gain the self-esteem necessary to excel in a foreign environment. Consequently, she encouraged her daughter Sarah Quinones to attend CCCC. Quinones, who received her Associate’s Degree in Liberal Arts in 2009, now works as a teacher in the tribe’s Head Start Program.

During the recent alumni reunion dinner and celebration, a steady stream of students and alumni paused to greet Jetty, shaking her hand warmly or embracing her. She admits she never would have imagined 40 years ago she would remain so closely tied with the college or that her daughter, Cynthia Lindquist, would one day be president.

This uniquely Dakota circle of family, relationships, and responsibility continues its display throughout the warm summer evening. Before eating, Lindquist calls upon an elder to lead the group in prayer. “We always begin our events and efforts with prayer,” she says. “It sets a special tone and confirms us as human beings, as Dakota people.”