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Chemawa Indian School

*Chemawa is supposed to offer an academic home preparing students for college or careers in a safe and stable place. But an OPB investigation found the school is breaking its promise.*

About This Series: Chemawa Indian School

This series is the result of almost three years of reporting by OPB reporters Rob Manning and Anthony Schick. After concerned staff members contacted OPB about troubles at the boarding school, Manning and Schick interviewed several dozen former Chemawa employees, students and parents and looked through hundreds of pages of records, including police reports, court records, depositions, academic reviews, financial documents and disciplinary reviews from Chemawa. They filed multiple Freedom of Information Act requests with the Bureau of Indian Education, which oversees Chemawa. Some are still pending.

The Bureau of Indian Education allowed the current director of Indian education and the current Chemawa superintendent to speak with OPB. They declined OPB’s requests to speak with other teachers and administrators on campus.

Investigate West reporter Rebecca Clarren provided background research and reporting guidance.

Charles Hudson, the intergovernmental affairs director for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission and Mandan-Hidatsa tribal member, reviewed the stories prior to publication with an eye toward cultural context.

# What's A Chemawa Diploma Really Worth?

*Any high school–aged member of a federally recognized Indian tribe is eligible for a free education at Chemawa Indian School, room and board included. But the Salem boarding school has struggled to meet students' academic needs.*

Chemawa Indian School has come a long way since its founding more than a century ago as part of the federal effort to forcibly assimilate Native American youth.

In the late 18th and into the 19th century, students were forbidden from speaking their own languages and were often required to do manual labor to build and maintain the campuses.

In the first half of the 20th century, the school focused on farming and vocational training, consistent with other federal policies toward Native Americans at the time. In recent decades, it became a magnet for students who were looking to escape broken homes, foster care or juvenile detention.

Today, administrators say Chemawa is part of an effort to focus off-reservation boarding schools on academics and preparing students for college.

“First and foremost, they’re education institutions,” said Bureau of Indian Education director Tony Dearman in an interview with OPB. “That’s the number one thing.”

Any high school-aged member of a federally recognized Indian tribe is eligible for a free education at Chemawa, room and board included. That open door attracts a wide range of students. Some are academic achievers looking to avoid distractions and finish high school quickly. Others are behind academically or have intense special needs that aren’t being met back home. Chemawa also attracts students trying to escape difficult circumstances on reservations and Native teenagers tired of the slights and frustrations of being Native American in predominantly white public schools.

People familiar with Chemawa say the school struggles to meet these broad and sometimes very different sets of academic challenges. Through dozens of interviews with former staff and students at Chemawa, a pattern emerged: Chemawa lacks programs for both high-achievers and students who need the most help, and the mostly white faculty and administration aren’t addressing the cultural needs of their Native students.

Sometimes, administrators have responded by lowering the bar to help students finish high school.

## **High School Interrupted**

Shanae Conger started as a sophomore at Chemawa in 2009, leaving the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community near Phoenix. Conger said attending Chemawa was her mother’s idea. She didn’t want to go, and her resistance only grew once she arrived on campus.

“When I got there, the administration didn’t make it a point to put me in core classes that I need,” Conger said. “They put me in art twice — all recreational classes that I did not need to graduate.”

Conger said she was a driven student when she came to Oregon and planned to graduate a year early. At Chemawa, however, she found herself pleading with administrators to let her replace electives on her schedule with academic subjects she needed to graduate.

“They basically told me that I couldn’t change anything,” Conger said. “‘So I’m just stuck in this class? I can’t do anything about it? I can’t even make changes for next semester?’”

Conger appealed to top people at the school; she said she even contacted the Bureau of Indian Education for help. She said the school finally made a change, but that created new problems.

“By the time they fixed it, they put me in the second part of a class that I needed the first part of the class for,” Conger said. “It was ridiculous.”

Other students have spoken more highly of the academics at Chemawa, particularly teenagers who had struggled in earlier grades. But Conger said she had high expectations of herself and of Chemawa, and she quickly became frustrated.

Conger withdrew from Chemawa during her sophomore year. She returned home to Arizona, but fought with her mother. She got thrown out of the house, so she found a job instead of returning to her education.

When Conger tried to return to school in the Phoenix area for her junior year, she said administrators at her new school couldn’t make sense of her Chemawa transcript.

“My credits and everything, [Chemawa] messed up everything that I had,” Conger said. “Instead of being a year ahead before, I’m now like a year-something behind.”

Conger’s transcript included courses that didn’t transfer easily to an Arizona public school. She said administrators at Salt River High School suggested her best bet was to return 1,300 miles north to the boarding school in Oregon.

Conger’s momentum toward graduating early had stopped. After leaving Chemawa in 2010, she wasn’t in school consistently until she re-enrolled in 2013, as a senior.

Her experience at Chemawa the second time around wasn’t any better. Conger said that even though she was academically eligible to live in an honors dorm with other seniors, she was placed in the same dorm she had occupied as a sophomore. Instead of living with her classmates, she was with students two or three years younger.

To her, it felt like a punishment. She walked off the Chemawa campus for good in winter 2014.

Over the next three years, Conger lived in Arizona, Montana and Oregon, working and occasionally going to school. She finally finished her GED last spring, nine years after the motivated student who aimed to graduate early started high school. She now lives in Mesa, Arizona, where she attends Scottsdale Community College and volunteers at an early childhood education center. She said she hopes to be a teacher one day.

“And a good one,” Conger added.

### **Attempts At A Turnaround**

As Conger was leaving Chemawa as a frustrated senior, the federal government was hiring a new superintendent there.

Lora Braucher took over at Chemawa after a national search for an educational leader with experience turning schools around. She had previously been an assistant principal at public schools in Lake County, Florida.

From 2003 to 2013, Chemawa had nearly a dozen changes at the top, including a mix of interim superintendents. Braucher has brought a bit of stability, and judging by test data provided to OPB, achievement is improving.

Chemawa students take an assessment test at the beginning and end of each academic year to measure how much they’ve learned in a given school year. The tests from Portland-based think tank Northwest Evaluation Association show that Chemawa students averaged about 12 percent growth over the course of the 2013-14 school year. Last school year, students showed 20 percent growth from the fall tests to the ones given in the spring.

Some staff familiar with the assessments suspect the growth is partly due to students simply getting better at answering multiple-choice questions.

There is less evidence of progress when it comes to Chemawa’s performance on the Smarter Balanced standardized tests that students take in many western states, including Oregon.

Chemawa’s test scores and graduation rates raise questions. In most cases, high school test scores and graduation rates track pretty closely, because kids who score poorly on standardized tests are less likely to graduate on time. But it’s a different pattern at Chemawa.

In 2015, fewer than 3 percent of Chemawa juniors tested as proficient at math, and about 32 percent tested proficient in reading. The Smarter Balanced high school exams are tough, but Chemawa’s passing rates are below the vast majority of Oregon public high schools. Yet Chemawa’s graduation rate of 72 percent for the same time frame was only slightly below the state average of 75 percent.

Few public schools in Oregon have test scores in both reading and math as low as Chemawa’s, and the ones that do generally have graduation rates of 30 percent, or lower.

By the numbers, Chemawa is no outlier in the Bureau of Indian Education. It is, instead, one example of academic struggle in a system that has chronically underserved Native students.

The BIE oversees 183 schools. On average, children in those schools score lower on reading and math tests than their public school counterparts by double digits. The graduation rate is 53 percent, compared to a national average of 81 percent.

Meanwhile, a series of audits from the Government Accountability Office has found numerous problems in the BIE’s oversight of academics, financial accountability, facilities and protections for student safety. Those reviews found textbooks arriving late in the school year at BIE schools, more than 100 teaching positions left unfilled across the agency and, in one instance, students being denied speech therapy because of a contracting issue.

This is all despite the fact the BIE spends an estimated $15,000 per year to educate each student, more than most public schools. Chemawa has the added cost of housing and feeding students. The boarding school’s $10 million budget comes almost entirely from federal taxpayers through the departments of Interior and Education.

Braucher said a number of factors help explain Chemawa’s struggles with certain standardized tests. Chemawa has high student turnover and serves students from all over the West, including states where students haven’t taken Smarter Balanced exams in lower grades. However, many students come from other Smarter Balanced states such as California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, South Dakota and Washington, or from other schools run by the BIE where Smarter Balanced tests are also administered. And student mobility is also an issue at many Oregon public high schools.

Former teachers say the gap between test scores and graduation rates is a sign that earning a Chemawa diploma isn’t preparing students for the next stage.

### **Chemawa Reimagined**

Administrators say they are working to recast Chemawa as a college preparatory school for Native kids. Longtime residence hall supervisor Ted Mack noticed a change in attitude from students.

“Fifteen years ago, they graduated from the school, they were really bright kids, but they just went home and sat on the reservation. They had no goals,” Mack said. “The mentality of the students has changed a lot too. They’re not coming there to party.”

Mitchell Lira enrolled at Chemawa in 2012. He came from Madras High School, where he felt Native students were not well supported.

“[Madras High] is a hard place to be around,” Lira said. “I don’t want to throw shade, but they have some of the lowest graduation rates in the state for people of color. For Native people, and especially coming from Warm Springs, the people I know, they didn’t graduate at a high rate.”

He’s right about the stats: In 2016, Madras High School’s graduation rate for Native American students was 39 percent — 18 points lower than the state average for Native students. By contrast, Chemawa was graduating nearly three out of four students.

Lira was a good student at Chemawa, a two-sport athlete and active in student government. He was building a resume for college.

Since before Braucher arrived in 2014, Chemawa has taken steps to improve college preparation. Chemawa has a partnership with Willamette University that introduces college students to Native American issues, while offering tutors from the university to Chemawa high schoolers.

Chemeketa Community College and Western Oregon University also run programs where Chemawa students can earn college credits.

But such initiatives don’t reach every student, and former staff and students say high-performing students such as Lira can feel shortchanged.

By Lira’s senior year, he had run out of math courses to take. The school enrolled Lira in an online pre-calculus class that he said was impossible without a teacher to help him. Pre-calculus wasn’t required for graduation, so Lira earned his diploma without finishing it.

Lira enrolled at the University of Oregon in fall 2015, believing he was ready. He wasn’t.

“All these people had all these big words, and I’m in the back of the classroom, I wouldn’t speak up,” he said. “I always knew I had to go to office hours, because I didn’t know what the heck they were saying. Whatever professor it was would ask ‘Did I do the reading?’ Yeah, I did the reading, but I didn’t understand.”

### **Instructional Gaps**

All sides agree that Chemawa is trying to serve an enormous range of student abilities. Some students enter ready and motivated. But many students enter Chemawa unprepared for even high school.

According to an October 2015 report from Superintendent Lora Braucher, “[O]ur students come to Chemawa a full 2-3 grade levels (or in some cases more) behind.”

Administrators contend many of Chemawa’s difficulties are funding-related, though its 14-to-1 ratio of students to teachers is smaller than what Oregon high schools typically have. That includes smaller alternative high schools geared exclusively for struggling students.

Budget difficulties have had a noticeable effect, Lira said. He said he took no foreign language at Chemawa, because it wasn’t required. By his final years at school, none were offered.

“They used to have Spanish, but they didn’t have the funding,” he said. “So they cut it.”

Braucher gives a different reason for Chemawa’s lack of foreign language courses.

“From what I’ve heard [parents] were not happy with the offering of Spanish, because Native language was not being offered,” she said.

Braucher said she struggles with the question of how an off-reservation boarding school should decide which Native language course to offer. Chemawa’s students belong to as many as 70 tribes, with maybe 50 different languages.

“What does that look like, when you’re trying to be equitable?” Braucher said.

Lack of offerings related to Native culture is a legitimate shortcoming at Chemawa, according to the Department of Interior’s Inspector General review of the school from July 2015. The report reminded school officials that the Native Languages Act of 1990 “encourages the use of native languages as a medium of instruction,” and Braucher said Chemawa is developing a “language lab” offering online resources. The report from two years ago also said Chemawa was not offering courses with enough of “a cultural component.”

Though virtually the entire Chemawa residential hall staff is Native, there is no tribal representation among the school’s top administrators and little on the teaching staff.

The lack of Native representation on Chemawa’s faculty has come up repeatedly in OPB’s interviews with former students.

### **Learning To Compensate**

Mitchell Lira said he struggled at the University of Oregon. He blames Chemawa for not being rigorous enough, but said he persevered.

“I wasn’t prepared because, yes, at times it didn’t challenge me academically,” he said.

Lira said he learned to work even harder and attend office hours to make up for the shortcomings of his high school career.

“You know, I just had to learn on the fly,” he said.

College professors point out that many students graduate from Oregon public high schools unprepared for the rigor and work demands of freshman year. Chemawa and the University of Oregon also have wildly distinct demographics: Chemawa is 100 percent Native, while the university student body is 75 percent white and less than 1 percent Native American. Other Oregon high schools with large populations of students of color also have noticed that their graduates can struggle in the predominantly white college ranks.

But Chemawa lacks some basic supports necessary for students hoping to be the first in their families to reach college.

SuSun Fisher graduated from Chemawa last spring. Like Lira, she was from an Oregon tribe, the Siletz, and served on the student council. She was well known around campus as “Miss Chemawa,” a designated cultural representative from the school.

Lira is now in his junior year in Eugene. Fisher is in her first year at the University of New Mexico and part of a successful trend Braucher can point to: Chemawa had more students apply to college last year, more were accepted and the amount Chemawa graduates received in scholarships went up.

The new focus on college prep is not reaching every student. Chemawa officials say the school is expanding an online college prep program, but the courses haven’t been large enough for all upperclassmen to participate.

Students with college aspirations aren’t getting the counseling they need either, Fisher said.

“I had a few friends that I helped do the [federal financial aid application] and do college apps and stuff like that,” Fisher said. “Because if I didn’t help them, they weren’t getting encouragement from anyone else. And the school counselor had a lot on her plate.”

Braucher said she’s working with teachers to challenge students more.

“We’ve really worked this last two years, three years, to implement strategies to help our students be better prepared, to raise our levels of rigor in our classroom,” she said.

Former staff members contend that Chemawa is not offering nearly enough support for students who come to the boarding school two or three grade levels behind. They worry that setting high expectations without offering enough support will leave students floundering and frustrated.

And former staff and students say Chemawa administrators sometimes take shortcuts when they cannot provide adequate student support.

Unlike Shanae Conger, who felt neglected and unsupported by administrators, both Fisher and Lira said they received favorable treatment. When visitors stopped by Chemawa, Fisher and Lira would be among the students administrators made sure the visitors met.

And when Fisher had a problem with her transcript her senior year, she said a school administrator fixed it for her.

“I asked … about my credits, because I needed a whole language arts credit, and I was wondering if I had to take online classes,” Fisher said, acknowledging that Chemawa often directs students to bridge gaps in their education by taking web-based courses.

Fisher said she was told that wouldn’t be necessary.

Chemawa requires two writing credits and four language arts credits to graduate. Fisher said the administrator changed a writing credit into a language arts credit to fulfill that diploma requirement.

“‘OK, you’re done now’,” Fisher recalled the administrator telling her. “So I graduated that day.”

The Bureau of Indian Education would not allow OPB to speak with any current Chemawa staff besides Braucher.

Other former staff recall students receiving foreign language credit for knowing a few words of their tribal language. Former teachers said they felt pressured to change grades to help students graduate, and in at least one case, watched as administrators changed a student’s grade to help the student graduate on time. Recent staff report seeing students they’d given failing grades receive a diploma.

Braucher flatly denied that any teachers are manipulating grades on her watch.

“Absolutely not,” she said. “If there were any instances of grade changes, that would be disciplinary in nature.”

Given the details of Fisher’s case specifically, Braucher responded she was “not aware of [it].”

Students Fisher and Lira said they tried to share their concerns with visitors, particularly members of Chemawa’s tribal advisory board. But Fisher said she worried that the “favored status” she felt she enjoyed could be rescinded. As she raised questions with administrators, she said she found herself on the outside looking in when visitors came.

### **Lack Of Special Education Services**

Lira and Fisher say Chemawa struggles to prepare college-bound students like them. Yet the boarding school is under federal scrutiny for broader problems.

Chemawa is in a federally required period of reorganization, due to persistently low test scores. A review in 2015 by the U.S. Department of Interior’s Inspector General found that Chemawa had fallen short on a basic first step toward improvement: completing a comprehensive assessment of the school’s strengths and weaknesses.

“We found that Chemawa Indian School’s comprehensive needs assessment did not address six of the eight critical areas related to strengths and seven of the eight critical areas related to needs and priorities,” read the Inspector General’s report on Chemawa.

In March 2017, when schools like Chemawa were trying to plan for the upcoming school year, they weren’t getting reassuring signals from Washington, D.C., Braucher said earlier this year in a speech for aspiring educators at Corban University.

She noted Chemawa was trying to meet the mandates of the restructuring order while dealing with a hiring freeze from President Trump.

“We are under a reorganization and have been for about two years, trying to better serve students,” Braucher said. “All of that came to a halt.”

A federal evaluation specifically into Chemawa’s special education program found the school didn’t show how it was fixing problems. Chemawa lacked documentation of how it was meeting legal mandates for special ed. About 14 percent of Chemawa’s students are identified as special education students.

Siletz tribal member Anita Espino worked at Chemawa for nearly three decades in both the academic building and residence halls. Much of her time in academics she spent in the special education program. She told OPB that if investigators dug deeper into special ed at Chemawa, they would find even more problems.

She said administrators tend to do what’s convenient, when what’s right for students — and what might be required by federal education law — is more difficult.

“If this kid’s supposed to be having an hour a day in English — that’s five hours a week he’s supposed to be having services — [if inspectors] go back and they’re not going to have it,” Espino predicted. “They’re putting kids in classrooms randomly: ‘We’re going to put someone in there because we have three kids — not because those three kids need specific help in English.’”

The recent federal review also found Chemawa wasn’t helping students in the school’s special education program lead independent lives after high school.

Espino recalls one Chemawa student who was receiving special education support, yet still struggling.

“She fell down a flight of stairs, then she did something — I think she got in a fight,” Espino said. “She had two concussions, so we sent her home. Then she came back her third year, she got pregnant and we graduated her.”

In other words, Espino said, rather than going through the difficult process of providing academic support and better supervision, the school took a shortcut and approved a diploma without the student having earned the necessary credits.

Espino said Chemawa’s decision to fast-track a student’s graduation when she didn’t earn it reflects an attitude she felt existed among administrators: that they’d rather send difficult students home than attempt to find solutions for their problems.

“This is the kind of stuff they do, if they want to get rid of you,” Espino said.

But Espino said all that did was make the girl’s education someone else’s problem. Espino said school officials at a community college back in Arizona, where this student was from, wouldn’t recognize the diploma.

“They said ‘Honey, this is not acceptable,’” Espino said.

Espino said the student had to go back to take high school classes again before she could resume her studies.