

# “What More Can We Want?”

## Indigenous Girls Navigating the Space between Chemawa Indian School and Oregon Public High Schools in the Early 20th Century

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During his tenure as superintendent of Tulalip Indian Reservation School in Marysville, Washington, between 1901 and 1920, Charles M. Buchanan reflected on the prospects for the Indigenous girls who attended the school and went on to study at Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon.

The majority of Indian girls who go off to the larger boarding schools are educated above their station. They are inspired with high and beautiful ideals, but ideals which are impossible in the life to which they are to return. . . . The majority of them return to their people, firmly resolved to show their benighted people the light. . . . Well, you have been brought up in the white people's way, what have you got to show for it? Money? No. Work? No. What is there here for you to do? Nothing. . . . Here lies the terrible tragedy, repeated a hundred times over year after year in every Indian community of any size.<sup>1</sup>

Buchanan's belief that the academic education of Indigenous girls was a terrible tragedy demonstrates the paradox of education for Indigenous youth in the early 20th century. Education had the possibility of representing hope, opportunity, and empowerment. Yet Buchanan's claim was that existing structures of society and reservation life offered Indigenous youth no way to realize those ideals, and thus white people's form of education was lost on them, girls in particular. Buchanan argued that providing education that represented hope and high ideals would result only in tragedy.

A deeper layer of irony in Buchanan's observations was that the education given Indigenous girls in government schools in reality did not educate them above their station, but instead placed them firmly in the ranks of domestic laborers through the enforcement of a colonizing, assimilationist educational paradigm. But what it did offer was hope and a window into greater educational opportunity, especially beyond the walls of these government schools. Vocational education, which for girls focused squarely on domestic education, rather than classical education or professional certifications, came to define Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) curricula in the early 20th century. Yet it is clear from the voices and actions of girls at Chemawa Indian School during this period that they were directly seeking education that did empower them with “high and beautiful ideals” and

with opportunities to expand their roles in greater society, an education beyond the constraints of gender-segregated vocational tracking that defined OIA schools across the country at this time.

In June 1911, Esther Napoleon, a student at Chemawa Indian School, wrote to her patron, the Washington state representative and member of the state house's Education Committee R. D. Shutt, to complain about the limits of her education at the school.

They are trying to make me work in the sewing room and I've made up my mind not to even if it gets me in trouble. I won't do it. People think they can just do as they please with me because I've been easy and take things as they come. But not so now and if you don't get me a place inside of two weeks I'll just as soon go to the dogs as because [*sic*] you know I don't like it here and I won't make good as long as I stay here.<sup>2</sup>

At the time she wrote this letter, Napoleon had been a student at Chemawa for five years. She wished to leave to pursue a career in nursing, a profession that Chemawa could not train her for. Napoleon was an orphan and a member of the Puyallup Tribe. Upon her arrival at Chemawa in February 1906, Representative Shutt managed her tribal land allotment money, and the superintendent of the school, Edwin Chalcraft, became her guardian, dictating when she could leave the school and where she could go. This type of paternal guardianship and financial oversight of students by white, male school administrators was common at Chemawa. After writing to Representative Shutt, Napoleon sent a letter to Superintendent Chalcraft in which she similarly implored his help to leave Chemawa.

It seems impossible for me to leave without having your word. I want to take up nurse training again and I know I cant [*sic*] take it here. I wrote to Mr. Shutt and asked him if he could get me a place but he didn't seem to answer and I think the reason is he wants me to ask you although he did not say so and I wish you could help me to get a place as I don't want to stay here all my life and not doing anything that I like to do because doing so I begin to have a grudge against this place.<sup>3</sup>

Both of these letters were written after Napoleon had completed her coursework at Chemawa, yet her guardians, in an attempt to monitor her and prevent her from taking up

with “bad company,”<sup>4</sup> denied her permission to leave the campus.

Napoleon continued to negotiate for financial and social independence, but there is no evidence in the surviving archival correspondence that Representative Shutt or Superintendent Chalcraft ever assisted her in her pursuit of further education in professional nursing. By 1912, Napoleon had left Chemawa without the consent of Chalcraft, moved to Wapato, Washington, and gotten married. The forcefulness and directness of both Esther Napoleon’s communications with her patrons and her will to change her situation are significant, especially considering that she was voicing her discontent to white men who had considerable power over her life and the lives of many Indigenous youths across the Pacific Northwest. Napoleon’s message highlights a trend at Chemawa of female students challenging the restrictions of limited and limiting education offered them through the U.S. government’s Office of Indian Affairs.

These Indigenous students navigated multiple and complex educational systems at a time when gender-segregated vocational education was influencing educational programming in both the OIA and the public schools. Gender-segregated vocational tracking did not reflect the needs and desires of many young Indigenous women, and Chemawa students were aware of the restraints it imposed upon them. They turned away from vocational education courses, courses that intentionally tracked them into domestic-education

programs and trained them for low-paid housework in the homes of middle-class white women, and turned toward curricular paths that offered financial and professional independence and security. This story of self-advocacy and acculturation on the part of these students complicates earlier narratives of government Indian education, which depicted Indigenous students as literally running away from government education. An examination of the intentionally gender-segregated nature of vocational education in the early 20th century and the way in which certain forms of vocational training were targeted toward female Indigenous students illustrates that this advocacy by female students for education on their own terms was a form of resistance to the white patriarchal norms embedded in the larger settler-colonial paradigm.

Gender-segregated vocational education in off-reservation Indian boarding schools was an essential component of an assimilationist program since the OIA began establishing schools in the 1880s. The goal of gender-segregated vocational education was to shape Indigenous identity in a fashion that would be both useful and nonthreatening to white American society.<sup>5</sup> Under this agenda, prejudices against Indigenous lifeways came to define policies that aimed not to equalize Indigenous people, but to firmly position them in subservient societal roles. The historian Margaret D. Jacobs’s seminal work on settler-Indigenous histories, *White Mother to a Dark Race*, provides valuable context for understanding the intentions of colonizing projects in



In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, students at Chemawa Indian School spent half their day in vocational training in preparation for the low-paid or unpaid jobs the Office of Indian Affairs expected them to hold. This photo of Chemawa students was taken sometime between 1890 and 1915. (Trover Studio, State Library of Oregon, 20050010055)



Chemawa Indian School, pictured here sometime between 1900 and 1910, was modeled after military schools to expedite the assimilation process of Indigenous youth. (State Library of Oregon, 20040010353)

the American West in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Jacobs explains that the perpetuation and effectiveness of settler colonialism was heavily dependent upon traditional European gender norms, which established the strict sexual division of labor. Beyond the important distinction that settler colonies “have combined elements of resource extraction, forced labor, and the appropriation of land,” these projects were heavily reliant upon the permanent presence of white women, who would establish homes, bear white children, and, through the promotion of the nuclear family, encourage the values of private property and individual household enterprise.<sup>6</sup> In the settler-colonial project, Indigenous girls had a prescribed role as low-paid or unpaid domestic laborers in the European conception of the individual, patriarchal home. Thus, they were incredibly significant to the project because they, through their domestic work, helped perpetuate the settler-colonial model.

The OIA’s intention was to prepare Indigenous women for this role. Jacobs’s analysis of the way gender roles operated in settler-colonial projects also ties directly in with the philosophy of social efficiency, espoused in vocational education policy. Social efficiency assumed a status quo in which future opportunities were defined by the limited opportunities of the present economy. Individuals were to be trained for specific positions in society, and, most significant, race, class, and gender had a profound impact on what those positions were. The decision to train Indigenous youth for manual labor was also heavily influenced by the assimilationist goals of the General Allotment Act of 1887 (Dawes Act) and later the Forced Fee Patenting Act of 1906 (Burke Act), both of which stipulated that Indigenous people, in order to gain access to the privileges of citizenship, must work and live in accordance with a prescribed paradigm of individual homesteading.<sup>7</sup> Because their roles in the domestic sphere were so pivotal to the success of the settler-colonial paradigm, by disrupting their prescribed position as domestic laborers, female Chemawa students had the potential to disrupt the sustainability of the settler-colonial

paradigm itself. This disruption was possible because these students sought out educational opportunities beyond the walls of OIA off-reservation schools and resisted gender-segregated vocational education tracking in public schools.

While vocational education was the norm at OIA schools at the dawn of the 20th century, it was not at the country’s public schools. However, the period of this study marked a vast expansion of vocational education in public schools. Between 1900 and 1930, thousands of schools across the United States implemented vocational curricula, and in 1917 the U.S. Congress began to direct federal money to the states for vocational education with passage of the Smith-Hughes Act. Like other education historians who have investigated vocational education in the Progressive Era, Marvin Lazerson and W. Norton Grubb explain the rise of vocational education in the beginning of the 20th century as a method of adaptation to the new work skills required after the Industrial Revolution. They see vocational education as an adjustment to a changing society or, as they explain, a means of “making schools more responsive to the new economic order.”<sup>8</sup> Though non-OIA schools increasingly offered gender-based vocational education in the early 20th century, they still allowed both boys and girls to pursue an academic track, something the girls from Chemawa took full advantage of.

Girls’ vocational education during this period was made up of three primary components. The first component encompassed domestic education, which included home-care training for future wives and mothers as well as for domestic servants. The second component consisted of trade-skill training for labor outside the home, including millinery, sewing, and work in the food industries. The third component consisted of commercial training—training for clerical and cashier jobs—which included courses in stenography, bookkeeping, typing, and sales.<sup>9</sup> Some of these vocations could be financially stable and provide women a respectable living, but most schooling offered through girls’ vocational education trained students for unpaid or low-paid work. The self-advocacy of Indigenous youth at Chemawa exposes the deeper fallacies of gender-segregated vocational education of the period, which claimed to be implemented so “that the individual [may] choose that vocation and those forms of social service in which his personality may develop and become most effective” yet in reality restricted financial and professional opportunities, especially for young women of color.<sup>10</sup>



Although the primary objective of two of the components of girls' vocational education was to provide students job training for paid work, all three were targeted and marketed as traditionally female and domestic-oriented occupations.<sup>11</sup> The implementation of vocational curricula was a direct representation of normative assumptions about women's and men's roles in society. As David S. Snedden, a prominent educational scholar in the Progressive Era and a leading proponent of vocational education and social efficiency, stated in his 1908 address to the National Education Association annual meeting, "Present educational practice differentiates between boys and girls in the provision of manual and domestic work in view of their different educational destinations."<sup>12</sup> Snedden's words highlight the tensions of this fascinating period in which traditional gender roles were being simultaneously resisted by students and female workers and enforced by education and policy leaders.

Chemawa Indian School, initially called the Forest Grove School, opened under Lieutenant Melville Wilkinson's leadership in 1880. Chemawa, like other early OIA off-reservation boarding schools, was modeled after military schools and thus established by retired military leaders. The strict military ethos was believed to expedite the assimilation process of Indigenous youth. The 4 girls and 14 boys enrolled that first year were tasked largely with building the school's original structures and establishing systems of farming.<sup>13</sup> By the turn of the century, the school's campus at its current location in Salem had expanded to more than 300 acres, and by 1920 the school enrolled 900 students from 90 western tribes, including Haida, Tlingit, Puyallup, Klamath, Columbia River, Modoc, Nez Perce, and Hupa. Students traveled from Alaska, Washington, Montana, Idaho, California, and Oregon to attend Chemawa.

By 1899, the U.S. government had opened 24 off-reservation Indian boarding schools, with an average daily attendance throughout the system of 6,263 students.<sup>14</sup> Many students living on reservations and in rural areas simply could not get to public school, so their only opportunity for attaining a secondary or even primary education was to attend an off-reservation boarding school. Access to public education was especially scarce from the early years of Chemawa through the 1930s. The federal government established a contract system that channeled money from the OIA to help subsidize Indigenous youth enrollment in public schools. This system was necessary because Indigenous

In this undated photo, Chemawa students do laundry. The Office of Indian Affairs intended its off-reservation boarding schools to prepare female Indigenous students for domestic work. (Trover Studio, State Library of Oregon, 20050010019)

families whose land allotments were held in trust by the government were considered wards and were thus exempt from paying local property taxes that subsidized public schools. In 1900, 118 Indigenous youth held contracts for public school subsidies. By 1927, more than 37,000 Indigenous youth held contracts.<sup>15</sup>

A large number of Chemawa students who had vied for access to this OIA school used it as a launch pad to attend a regional public high school. This phenomenon explains how during the same period K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty could find that growing numbers of Indigenous youth were entering public schools and David Wallace Adams could find that the enrollment of Indigenous youth in OIA schools was growing.<sup>16</sup> Female students' writings as well as school administrative documents demonstrate that Chemawa girls wanted access to education that provided economic and professional opportunity. These materials also show that these girls were attending classes at schools beyond Chemawa in large numbers. Students sought out opportunities at a regional business college that offered commercial certification programs, as well as at regional public high schools that offered access to higher education. They also fought for professional certification programs in nursing within the Chemawa program. As the female student Rena Mann, a member of the Klamath tribe, explained in an opinion piece published in the school paper, the *Chemawa American*, in August 1910, a four-year high school diploma from a state-accredited school offered a path toward higher education, something a degree from Chemawa could not.

I know that my subject is an unpopular one. That an Indian girl should presume to even wish for higher training than that given by our generous government, is frowned upon by many very good friends of the Indian people who have, really, the Indian's best interests at heart.



They may frown, they may object, and, in some cases, even forbid, but how about the Indian girl herself? Has she no choice in the matter? . . .

. . . Our training, outside of the Academic department, has been of such a character that we are able to do housework, able to cook, to launder, to sew, and some of us have learned how to nurse and care for the sick.

What more can we want? Why should an Indian girl who has had such advantages aspire to anything higher? What can be better than a good housekeeper—a good homemaker? We, who desire more education do not say that any thing is better, but we do say that if our tastes and inclinations urge us to go on with our studies, we should be encouraged, not discouraged and made to feel that we are ungrateful for what has been done for us.

Will a few years more of study hurt us? Are we all to be considered Indians, with all the limitations the words [*sic*] usually suggests? Are none of us to be considered as individuals? . . .

In closing, I would say that I do not think all Indians girls who graduate from schools like this should enter higher school, but I do say that if I or any girl is really eager for a higher education it should not be denied us.<sup>17</sup>

Rena Mann's opinion piece is, perhaps, exceptional in its forwardness. But the fact that it was published in the school paper suggests that the opinion did not exist in isolation. Mann pointedly highlighted domestic labor in her critique of the school. But in a very perceptive manner, she did not pass a value judgment on domestic work itself. Rather, her call was for choice in education. Her writing is compelling because she argues that choice should be available to her and other female students; by implying that it is not, she highlights her and other students' awareness of the restrictions of the education offered them.

Primary among the schools that Chemawa's female students sought to attend was Salem Public High School, opened in 1905. In 1907, seven of the school's nine faculty members held college degrees.<sup>18</sup> Upon its opening, the high school immediately experienced high student demand, and it continually dealt with issues of overcrowding due to unexpectedly high enrollment. Chemawa students began to seek admittance to Salem High School in 1907, just two years after its opening.<sup>19</sup> Indigenous youth on the Chemawa campus, as with the local youth in Salem, saw the new public high school as a resource that they wanted to benefit from. By 1914, the school enrolled 752 students.<sup>20</sup>

Although the school offered courses in commercial studies as well as vocational education courses, the academic curriculum defined the program. And, most significant, the vocational and manual-training courses were offered as electives, whereas the academic course of study was required. Salem High School's 1915 curriculum consisted of three different academic tracks: classical, scientific, and literary. For the courses offered in each track, see table 1.

**TABLE 1. Salem High School Curriculum, 1915**

Freshman year

Classical: Grammar, algebra, Greece, Latin, Rome

Scientific: Grammar, algebra, physical geography, German

Literary: Grammar, algebra, physical geography, Greece, Rome

Sophomore year

Classical: Rhetoric, algebra, medieval history, Latin, plane geometry

Scientific: Rhetoric, algebra, botany, German, plane geometry

Literary: Rhetoric, algebra, botany, medieval history, plane geometry

Junior year

Classical: Plane geometry, English literature, physics, Latin, solid geometry, German

Scientific: Plane geometry, English literature, physics, German, solid geometry

Literary: Plane geometry, English literature, physics, English history, solid geometry

Senior Year

Classical: American literature, chemistry, Latin, and optional courses

Scientific: American literature, chemistry, bookkeeping, and optional courses

Literary: American literature, chemistry, American history, political economy, and optional courses

Optional courses: Music, drawing, stenography, domestic science, typewriting, and manual training

*Source:* Box 28, Decimal Files, 1924-55, Records of the Chemawa Indian School, Records of Indian Schools, 1871-1985, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives at Seattle.

Many of Chemawa's female students attended schools in the Portland area as well, where they would work in the homes of local white women as domestic help through Chemawa's outing program. Though, as early as 1910, the Portland public school district had a trade school for boys and domestic-education courses at various high schools for girls, the city's schools also offered an academic curriculum not available at Chemawa. The breakdown of the courses taken by graduating seniors (12th grade) at the coeducational Jefferson and Lincoln High Schools, both in Portland, in 1913 and 1914, respectively, is illustrated in table 2.

In comparison, in 1917, Chemawa offered to both boys and girls arithmetic, civics, current events, drawing, English, geography, literary study, nature study and gardening, penmanship, physiology, reading, spelling, and physics. The school did not offer higher-level mathematics or Latin,

**TABLE 2. Courses taken by seniors at Jefferson and Lincoln High Schools, 1913 and 1914**

Jefferson High School, 1913	Lincoln High School, 1914
College prep (15 girls, 9 boys)	College prep (1 girl, 3 boys)
Latin (9 girls, 4 boys)	Latin (2 girls, 0 boys)
English (7 girls, 13 boys)	English (3 girls, 12 boys)
German (6 girls, 2 boys)	German (6 girls, 2 boys)
Commercial (0 girls, 6 boys)	Commercial (2 girls, 3 boys)
Teaching (7 girls, 1 boy)	Teaching (6 girls, 0 boys)
Manual training (2 boys)*	Domestic arts and science (2 girls)**
Domestic science (2 girls)**	

\* Optional course of study, for boys only.  
\*\* Optional course of study, for girls only.

Sources: Jefferson High School commencement book, 1913, folder 8, and Lincoln High School commencement book, 1914, folder 10, both in box 24, Education Collection, 1717-2015, Oregon Historical Society (OHS), Portland.

which were requirements for admission to university. Half the school day was devoted to academic work, and half was devoted to manual labor in the gender-segregated vocational programs. The vocational program offered to girls consisted of courses in domestic science (caring for the home, cooking and sewing, making menus, laundering, gardening, raising poultry) and domestic arts (plain sewing, dressmaking, embroidering, weaving, millinery, personal finance). The following year, the academic curriculum for girls at Chemawa was even more limited. In 1918, the curriculum at Chemawa for girls in the 10th grade, the highest grade the school offered at that point, consisted of English, child study, rural economics, and general exercises, with the electives of sewing and cookery or tailoring and nursing.<sup>21</sup>

Young Indigenous women from Chemawa going into Salem High School and other Oregon public schools found an educational system that was in some ways reflective of the assimilationist programming that they left in Chemawa, in that there were distinctly different paths for boys and girls. But a major difference between Chemawa and Oregon public high schools was that this gender-segregated tracking was still largely optional, and there were many curricular choices offered to young women in the public school system that were completely out of reach at Chemawa.

In 1921, Chemawa administrators began discussing possible changes to the school's curriculum. Chemawa's acting principal, Flora Iliff, told the school's superintendent, Harwood Hall, that the "majority" of Chemawa graduates were going on to finish their high school degrees at Salem High School.<sup>22</sup> Iliff did not mention any numbers in her letter, but that year a local newspaper, the *Capital Journal*, reported that 13 Indigenous youth from Chemawa were attending Salem High School in an article about whether the Salem school board should cover the costs of Chemawa stu-

dents attending Salem High School after the federal government temporarily suspended funding for Indigenous youth attending public schools because of fiscal constraints. The school board was considering paying \$95 per student to keep them enrolled. Dr. H. H. Olinger, a member of the school board, supported a plan for the district to pay the students' tuition. "Chemawa, he declared, means much to Salem, and Chemawa Indians should be considered."<sup>23</sup> In her letter, Iliff recommended that Chemawa consider adding an 11th and 12th grade in order to provide a full high school diploma to graduates, which the school would not do for a few more years.<sup>24</sup> That same year, Superintendent Hall informed Iliff of a request from two current students, Marguerite Chamberlin and Frances Thorpe, to pursue a degree at Salem High School and discussed how they might alter their curriculum to better prepare their students to continue on at the public school.

Concerning the adjusting of our course to that of Salem High, where the majority of our graduates continue their education, Professor Nelson emphatically approves the plan to follow our one semester of chemistry, which has already been given to our 9th year, with a semester of General Science, omitting the parts of the text book which deals with chemistry. I will add for your information that our graduates now enter Salem High (Junior Year) with 19 credits, out of a required 37 for graduation.<sup>25</sup>

This letter illustrates not only Marguerite Chamberlin's and Frances Thorpe's ambition to take advantage of the public school system and the curricular options it offered that Chemawa did not, but also a fundamental problem with the gender-segregated vocational curriculum at Chemawa: this vocational education in many ways did not meet the needs of young Indigenous women and the changing roles women in general were beginning to play across the nation.

At Salem and Portland public schools, there was always cur-

ricular choice for both boys and girls. And Portland-area girls voted with their feet in response to these choices. In 1921, 484 girls were enrolled in the polytechnic vocational school, which offered them courses in domestic arts, domestic science, millinery, industrial art, metal art, English, arithmetic, civics, history, music, home nursing, hygiene, and physical education. The curriculum of the polytechnic school largely mirrored that of the curriculum at Chemawa, yet attending this school was optional for Portland-area girls. The coeducational High School of Commerce, which offered a business course, enrolled 536 girls in 1921. At the same time, 4,166 girls were enrolled in the five other area high schools, which offered classical education courses including college preparation. In her 1921 annual report on female students in the Portland school district, the dean of girls, Caroline Holman, observed,

That the desire for continuing study beyond the regular four years of a high school course has become almost universal is evidenced by the number of [female] graduates who return for additional subjects and also by the number of self-supporting [female] students who are forming definite plans for going to college.<sup>26</sup>

By 1924, girls at Lincoln High School made up the majority of students in the college preparatory program, the English program, and the classical program. Fifty-two percent of that year's graduates were girls.<sup>27</sup>

Although domestic-education curricula were instituted in response to the top-down, somewhat arbitrary decisions to direct federal funds toward such programs, they were contrary to student demand. According to the *Thirty-Fourth Annual Report for Seattle Public Schools*, covering the years 1916-21, only 4 percent of all female students chose to register in home economics courses.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, in Salem, like in Portland, home economics was an optional course of study for female public high school students. All public high school students in the state were offered an academic track

targeted toward admittance to institutions of higher education.

In 1927 Chemawa added the 11th and 12th grades to provide a full high school diploma to its students. However, vocational education still took up half the school day, and the only option for vocational study for female students was home economics. An examination of the 12th-grade curriculum for boys and girls at Portland's Lincoln High School in 1924 and for girls at Chemawa in 1928 presented in table 3 illustrates the contrast in academic priorities at the two schools. The vocational training for girls at Chemawa at this time was called home economics, and all girls were required to take it.

Chemawa students continued to pursue their education at the region's public schools in the following decade. Although Indigenous youth could attend Salem High School tuition free by the 1930s, they had to apply for funding from the Office of Indian Affairs in order to board on the Chemawa campus so that they could commute to Salem High School every day. In a 1934 application submitted by the Chemawa administration to the Office of Indian Affairs, five students were recommended for funding to attend Salem High School. Included in the application was an explanation for each student's request: Bernice Clairmont, of the Flathead Agency, to secure better high school preparation before entrance to a hospital for nurse's training; Francis Thomas, of the Warm Springs Agency, to secure a better foundation for college entrance and the further study of music; Winfred Parker, of the Tongue River Agency, to secure better preparation for college entrance; Dorothy Parker, of the Taholah Agency, to secure better preparation for college entrance; and Clarence Emmons, of the Yankton Agency, to secure better preparation for college entrance.<sup>29</sup> These applicants, four out of five of whom were girls, all sought access to higher education and professional certifi-

**TABLE 3. Courses taken by seniors at Lincoln High and Chemawa Indian Schools, 1924 and 1928**

Lincoln High School, 1924	Chemawa Indian School, 1928
College prep (29 girls, 8 boys)	English
English (62 girls, 38 boys)	Physics
Scientific course (1 girl, 12 boys)	Arithmetic
Classical course (8 girls, 1 boy)	American history
Modern language (3 girls, 0 boys)	Civics
Latin (1 girl, 1 boy)	Rural economics
	General exercises
	Vocational: Home economics

Sources: Lincoln High School commencement book, 1924, folder 10, box 24, Educational Collection, OHS; Reports on Examinations, Academic Records, 1917-32, Records of the Chemawa Indian School.



cations that Chemawa could not offer even with a four-year high school degree. These students were seeking curricular options outside of vocational education, with female Chemawa students specifically requesting choice in their educational paths.

By the 1930s, Chemawa students were entering public high schools out of not only choice, but also necessity. The late 1920s and early 1930s marked a tense time in the funding of federal Indian education. In 1933, Chemawa lost nearly all government funding and had to close its doors for several months, due in part to the Great Depression and in part to the fallout from the 1928 Meriam Report, an economic and social study of conditions for Indians that was highly critical of federal Indian policy. Interestingly, off-reservation boarding schools had some of their highest enrollments at this time: by 1931, for instance, 29 percent of Indigenous schoolchildren were at government boarding schools.<sup>30</sup> But because of financial strains, it became OIA policy to encourage Indigenous youth to enroll in public schools.<sup>31</sup> This put OIA schools in the paradoxical position of trying to persuade a number of their students to leave while also attempting to justify their existence as they sought sparse federal funding. Meanwhile, more and more urban and rural districts around the nation were opening public high schools.

The expansion of public high schools and the funding crisis for OIA schools made the question of Chemawa's purpose and necessity immediate and challenged leaders in both OIA and public education to assess the value and role of education in the lives of Indigenous youth. In 1934 faculty at Chemawa, in cooperation with faculty at Oregon State Agricultural College, drafted a report with the purpose of reexamining and making recommendations for vocational curricula at Chemawa. The two primary authors of the report, William Sherman and William Allen, were electrical and shop instructors at Chemawa, as well as students at Oregon State Agricultural College. They developed the report in cooperation with O. D. Adams, the state director of vocational education.

In the report's general statement, the authors discuss the OIA schools' recent difficulties and raise the question of what purpose these schools should serve.

In recent years the Indian Office has expressed considerable doubt as to the advisability of continuing the non-reservation boarding schools unless training was more definite in character. No doubt there is a good foundation for this belief. The non-reservation Indian Schools have not and cannot under the frequent changes of administration maintain a standard of training equal to that of the locally controlled district school. Since the political and economic disturbance of 1933, Indian children are encouraged, wherever possible, to take advantage of the facilities offered by the local

schools, or, if conditions warrant, new reservation schools are built, and those already established improved to meet the change in educational policy. This change raises the question—if the non-reservation boarding schools are to aid in furthering the education of Indian youth, how can they be made effective under present conditions?<sup>32</sup>

At the time the report was written, Chemawa still followed a curricular pattern in which half the day was spent on academics and half the day was spent on vocationally targeted manual labor, work that largely kept the school facilities, such as food production, laundry, et cetera, in operation. According to the report, in the years 1933-34 Chemawa offered both boys and girls a two-year commercial course. In addition, boys were offered the following courses: auto mechanics, carpentry, blacksmithing, gas welding, shoe repair, house wiring, barbering, tailoring, machine shop practice, plumbing and sheet-metal work, cleaning and pressing, restaurant and camp cooking, stationary steam engineering, painting and house decorating, dairying, farming and gardening, and job printing. In addition to the two-year commercial course, girls were offered courses in practical nursing (which did not offer any form of professional certification), cosmetology, childcare, and home economics.<sup>33</sup> Boys at Chemawa clearly had many more study options than girls, yet those options were only in the field of vocational and manual labor. It is also clear that the options offered girls were not targeted toward professional certification or access to higher education, but rather toward manual labor predominantly in the home and domestic arena.

Sherman and Allen singled out the provision of vocational manual-labor education as the primary goal of the Chemawa Indian School and the broader mission of OIA education. They believed that in order to ensure the survival and relevancy of Chemawa, the school must significantly bolster its focus on vocational education. Their conclusion was that Chemawa students should continue to spend half the day working as part of their vocational training and half the day on academics. The authors were skeptical of a high school track focused on academics and higher education.

The authors of the 1934 report argued that traditional academics, curricula with a trajectory toward professionalism and higher education, was a waste of time for Indigenous youth. Academic curricula aimed at higher education or professionalization for Indigenous youth was an "injustice," they argued, and did not adhere to the prescribed paradigm of lifeways intended for Indigenous people. In fact, the authors claimed that due to Indians' "passiveness," professionalization and higher education were simply not reasonable goals. "It seems to the writers an injustice to train the individual in an occupation for which he is unfitted, to bolster and encourage his belief that he can go out and succeed in his chosen field, only to have him find in a short time defeat





Costmetology  
Barber Science

Nursing  
Sewing

The authors of a 1934 report on Chemawa's curriculum concluded that students should continue to spend half the day working as part of their vocational training and half the day on academics. Photos from the report showing students involved in vocational training are shown above. (Harold L. Shilling, William A. Sherman, and William L. Allen, "A Survey of Vocational Education," 1934, box 28, Records of the Chemawa Indian School)

and disillusionment," the authors write, echoing the sentiments of Charles Buchanan, who had described the academic education of Indigenous girls as a terrible tragedy.<sup>34</sup> These sentiments also reflect the philosophy of social efficiency in education that encouraged the vocational training of specific identity groups for specific forms of labor. Sherman and Allen justified the perpetuation of the vocational training program at Chemawa, accompanied by a minimalist academic program, based on assumptions about the passivity of Indigenous youth.

The authors recommended that "a very thorough and accurate survey should be made of the opportunities offered the Indian for making a living."<sup>35</sup> Ironically, one year before the report was submitted, Chemawa leaders administered a survey to students to determine the future of the school, based on the needs and objectives of the students themselves at a time when the school's closure was a looming possibility. The survey responses provide insight into the individual Chemawa student's experience and "positionality"—that is, the social and political context that created his or her identity and how each student's identity influenced his or her understanding of and outlook on the world. They also reveal much about what students wanted from their education.

In the survey, students were asked a number of direct yes or no questions regarding school access, financial resources, and home environments. They also had opportunities, through open-ended questions, to write personally crafted responses to questions about their future. These student responses, in particular to the open-ended questions, are rich examples of student voices, accessed through a medium that specifically asked students to be honest and thorough. Two points emerge when analyzing the 1934 vocational education report and the 1933 student surveys. First, the 1934 vocational education report represents a connection between public vocational education policy and OIA educational policy, exemplifying that these two worlds did not operate in isolation from each other but rather influenced each other in significant ways. Second, the 1934 report's assessment of the Chemawa curriculum, particularly its intentional exclusion of an analysis of the girls' curriculum, misses many of the real circumstances and needs of Indigenous girls. Although there were examples of local Chemawa leaders advocating on the part of students, school officials were largely ignorant of or chose to ignore the changing educational needs and desires of Indigenous girls, especially in the context of the changing roles of women workers in the larger economy.

The authors of the 1934 report were clear about why they focused their analytical lens specifically on the education of boys. They wrote in their introduction, "The field is too large and the time too short to include both boys and girls and since the boys are the potential wage earners of the future to a larger extent than the girls, the scope of this paper will be limited to the former."<sup>36</sup> This justification for excluding girls from the report, on the assumption that they would largely not be wage earners, is profoundly ironic when compared to the female student survey responses, collected just a year prior to the vocational education report. The majority of female students in the 1933 surveys reported that they wished to continue with secondary and, in many cases, higher education—including education at a

university, business and commercial school, or normal school (for teacher training)—and also wished to leave their home communities in order to gain secure employment and financial stability as wage earners.

In 1933, when the survey was conducted, Chemawa had ended its elementary education program and offered schooling only for secondary education students. The survey respondents ranged in age from 13 to 19. The purpose of the survey was to assess not only where students would go if the school closed but also what the students' goals for education and work were beyond Chemawa. Unfortunately, it is unclear how this survey was used after it was administered. There is no reference to the survey in future administrative reports. The survey read as follows.

Below is confidential information to be used in determining whether Chemawa Vocational School should be retained or abolished. Please answer each question honestly and carefully:

Name/Age/Tribe/Blood

If Chemawa is closed where will you go to school?  
Is your father alive? Is your mother alive?  
Number in your family of school age?  
Is your father employed? How is he employed?  
What income do your parents have?  
Do you have any source of personal income? How much is your personal income?  
Can your parents afford to buy schoolbooks and clothes and pay your transportation to school?  
What grade will you be in next year?  
How far do you live from public school?  
Where do you live? Can you ride to school in a school bus?  
What is the highest grade taught in your home school?  
Do your parents have a permanent home where they live? How many rooms?  
What vocation are you studying?  
Could you learn this vocation in your home school?  
How do you plan to earn your living when you graduate?  
Do you wish to live permanently at your present home? If not, why not?<sup>37</sup>

In total, 300 female students were surveyed. Based on student responses, 213 of the 300 female students surveyed did not have access to a four-year public high school in their home communities, while 87 students did have access, financially and geographically, to a four-year public high school. Fourteen of the 87 students specifically requested that they attend another off-reservation OIA boarding school if Chemawa closed, because they would prefer to be at an OIA boarding school. One hundred and ninety-nine of the 300 students stated they did not have any personal income. The students with access to personal income indicated this income predominantly took the form of lease or rent money from a land allotment.

In terms of female student intentions for future work and

school, 39 students specified that they planned to pursue higher education, in the form of college, business school, a nurse certification program, or normal school. In response to question 15, "How do you plan to earn your living when you graduate?" 62 specified nursing, 37 specified commercial work in a business, 28 specified domestic work, 21 specified teaching, and 9 specified working as a seamstress. Notably, more than half the students, mostly those under the age of 16, left questions 13 thru 15, those regarding their future study and work plans, blank or wrote "undecided" in response to those questions.

Half the female students surveyed, 150, stated that they did *not* wish to live permanently at their present home (question 16). The written responses to the second part of this question, "If not, why not?," reveal a great deal about not only what female students' ambitions were, but also the restrictions and obstacles the girls themselves saw as hindering those ambitions. Their responses also further support the idea that for many Indigenous youth, Chemawa was perceived as a launch pad for greater opportunity, opportunity that necessitated empowering education and financial stability. For many of these Indigenous girls, Chemawa was not an isolating environment, or "total institution," but rather a gateway through which they could connect to other communities and especially to work and continuing educational opportunities.<sup>38</sup>

Student responses as to why they did not want to live in their home communities can be categorized under four major themes: educational opportunity, financial independence, family support, and home environment. The majority of students who responded that they would not like to live permanently in their present home, and provided explanations as to why, wrote specifically about seeking greater educational and financial opportunities, which they perceived as not available in their home communities. Below is a sampling of responses related to educational opportunity:

"Because I want to go to college and make a living of my own."  
"Because I have higher ambition."  
"I wish to be away so I can get a good education."  
"No. If at home [I] would be unable to attend school. Father too poor to send all to public school. [I] would have to take care of the home and give younger children a chance."  
"Because I want to get an education and earn my own living."  
"No chance of getting the education I want. No position worth while."  
"Does not [offer] opportunity for advancement."  
"Because I want to get out into the world."  
"We have no way to send me to school. I want an education."<sup>39</sup>

Many female students also wrote about a stark lack of employment opportunities in their home communities. Many of these students lived on or near tribal reservations or in remote, rural regions. Responses in the category of financial independence include:

“I would like to work for myself.”  
 “Because jobs are not so good there.”  
 “Because I want to earn my own living.”  
 “Because I would like to go out and work for myself.”  
 “Because I can’t get work that would suit me. Live too far from town and cant [*sic*] get any kind of work.”  
 “I have to earn a living for myself.”  
 “Not enough opportunities to make a success of myself.”  
 “I am not satisfied with the standard of living.”  
 “There are no opportunities for obtaining work and earning a living.”  
 “I want to go where I have more advantages.”  
 “So I can make my own living.”<sup>40</sup>

Considering that two thirds, or 199, of the female students had no personal income, and the majority of those students’ families also had minimal or no income, many of these students were advocating for themselves in response to their extreme poverty. These female students connected their future work opportunities with their educational opportunities, as many stated directly in their written responses. They were also seeking employment that provided financial stability, in many cases not just for themselves but also for their families. And they clearly identified these opportunities as existing outside their home communities.

The third and fourth themes that emerged in the responses to question 16—family support and home environment—also related to financial independence and survival. A number of students wrote about their desire to not be a burden on their impoverished families by either leaving home or financially assisting their families through work in a stable profession. Responses in this vein include:

“I want to work and not live my life off my parents.”  
 “I wish to help send my brothers through school.”  
 “Because I want to go out and see people and I want to earn my own living so that I can help my parents.”  
 “Because I would like to get around in the world and make my own living and not to depend upon my parents.”  
 “Because there are six in our family and my parents will have too many to support and I would like to work somewhere to help my parents and get an education.”<sup>41</sup>

Significantly, some of the students who did have access to local four-year high school programs specifically requested that they either stay on at Chemawa or attend another OIA boarding school program because they desperately wanted to finish their education and their family did not have a permanent home for them to stay in while they attended their local public high school. One example of this scenario was 17-year-old Rita Ging, a member of the Assiniboine tribe from Poplar, Montana. Ging did have access to a local four-year public high school in Poplar, but her family had no permanent home, which would make regular attendance for her at the school very difficult. Another example was 13-year-old Alta Tom, a member of the Rogue River tribe,

from Siletz, Oregon. Tom did have access to a four-year public high school in Siletz but explained that she would prefer not to live permanently at her present home “because the people are not nice people. They drink too much. I cannot get the kind of work that makes me amount to much.”<sup>42</sup>

The results of the student surveys signify that female students wanted access to education that provided them financial stability and opportunity. But the path to obtaining that education was complex, and students had to navigate many challenging circumstances. These students were poor, and they saw education and professionalization, including nursing, teaching, and commercial work, as their means of gaining financial independence. Although 28 students specified that they planned to make a living employed as domestic workers, a number of these students specified that they would do this work in order to pay for more schooling. Domestic labor was a steppingstone, not the goal, for many of these young women. In their clarity regarding their goals, these Chemawa students were actively seeking to redefine what their station in life could be. Based on course enrollment data for Oregon public high schools during this time, many young white women were seeking this as well. Again, when student responses in the 1933 survey are compared to the findings in the 1934 vocational education report, it is clear that there was a great disconnect, either intentional or unintentional, between the needs and desires specifically of female students and the administrative agenda of the school leaders and vocational education policymakers.

The story of Indigenous girls’ self-advocacy at and beyond Chemawa Indian School is one of many stories that are now being told about Indigenous youths’ action and agency, stories that collectively disrupt settler-colonial narratives of Indigenous victimhood and passivity. Female students at Chemawa Indian School turned the power of OIA educational policy by actively defining their own education and advocating for choice in their learning and professional options. First introduced by Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc, the concept of “turning the power” reflects the idea that Indigenous students in off-reservation Indian boarding schools actively and intentionally transformed their educational experiences into something that would benefit them and their communities.<sup>43</sup> Female students at Chemawa Indian School “turned the power” of OIA educational policy by actively working to define their own education and advocating for choice in their learning and professional options. Kevin Whalen, in his recent book on Indian labor and vocational training at Sherman Institute between 1900 and 1945, also connects to the concept of Indigenous students “turning the power,” particularly in relation to Sherman Institute’s outing programs. Whalen makes the argument that Indigenous youth, through the school’s outing programs, were able to expand



their worlds and thus their opportunities, appropriating opportunity that was not intended in these manual-training programs.<sup>44</sup> Female students at Chemawa also used the school's outing program to their advantage, attending schools in the Portland area while working in the homes of local white women as domestic help.

By seeking out types of education that offered paths to financial independence, Chemawa female students defined how they would pilot themselves and their people in the changing world. They navigated multiple educational spaces, including Chemawa as well as regional public schools. The story of female students at Chemawa is one of students turning toward education but negotiating education on their terms. Female students at Chemawa also worked creatively to define themselves, largely rejecting the image of the domesticated Indigenous wife and mother that settler colonialism attempted to impose upon them. Vocational education policy in both OIA and public education was a form of resisting girls' expanding economic, social, and political roles, and Chemawa girls' self-definition revolved principally around how they chose to work in the world. Resistance on the part of girls at Chemawa embodied

self-definition outside of the domesticated, unpaid or low-paid labor that was expected of them in this educational paradigm. Female students at Chemawa actively sought educational and professional opportunities that afforded them social and financial stability. The way Indigenous girls perceived their role in the changing industrial world flew in the face of a social-efficiency educational paradigm that tried to relegate them to unpaid or low-paid positions in domestic labor. The educational self-advocacy of these Indigenous girls disrupted the perceived boundaries of control of OIA Indian boarding schools as well as questioned the broader validity of gender-segregated vocational education in the public school system.

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