Students enrolled in the Summerterm course, Lakota Philosophy and Culture, led by Bernard den Ouden, professor of philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences, spent a week in May living with and learning from Native Americans of Minnesota, including descendants of Sitting Bull and Chief Red Cloud. Professor den Ouden sent his account of the trip to The Observer.

This past May 12, students from the University of Hartford and I traveled with two friends of mine from Minnesota to some of the sacred sites of the Lakota and Dakota nations. The difference between the Dakota and the Lakota, according to my native friends, is the dialect that they speak. Collectively, these people are known as the Sioux.

The objective of this Summerterm course was to learn about Dakota and Lakota culture, history, and philosophy from tribal elders and other native people, by reading books authored by them and by conducting interviews and listening to oral histories. My hope was that the students would learn a great deal from direct contact with individuals who are part of a culture in our own country that has endured attempts to destroy that culture and the people’s modes of sustaining themselves.

Central to this process was our visit to Pine Ridge Reservation, a homeland for many Lakota. Here we stayed with Eli Tail and his extended family. Eli is from the Crazy Horse clan. According to tribal legend, Crazy Horse—who joined forces with Sitting Bull at the Battle of the Little Bighorn to defeat General George Custer—was buried in an unmarked grave in the hills above Eli’s compound. We learned a great deal of the history and culture of the region from my friend Eli and his wife, Caroline, who is a human rights activist.

Eli’s entire clan warmly welcomed us, and soon the students were involved in multigenerational conversations that continued from early morning to late at night, and even as we rode horseback together across the reservation. During our visit we slept in tepees and ate traditional Native American food. Eli’s neighbors, the Porcupine Singers, a nationally known group that sings traditional songs of the Lakota Sioux, provided music and gave dance lessons to the students.
While we were at Pine Ridge, we visited a branch of the Oglala-Lakota College and heard a presentation from Phyllis Swift Hawk, a great-granddaughter of Sitting Bull. She shared an extensive personal history drawn from her ancestors and the life of her people. Henry Red Cloud, a great-grandson of the legendary Lakota chief, Red Cloud, took us on a tour of projects sponsored by Trees, Land, and People, an environmental and sustainable development organization that works on energy and housing issues on the reservation.

We were invited to speak on reservation radio, where the students introduced themselves and I had an opportunity to describe the purpose of our visit. Ferdinand Rodriguez, the hip-hop artist in our group, concluded the broadcast with a rap poem, an example of one that he would write for every day of our travels. We then moved on to Wounded Knee, site of Chief Big Foot's last camp in 1890, and the massacre of largely women, children, and the elderly. While there, the students and I remembered, stood in silence and shock near the mass grave, and wept together.

From Wounded Knee we drove down to Fort Robinson, which was a center for the U.S. Cavalry. It was also the site of the Red Cloud Agency, or reservation. We discussed the history of the Indian Wars and stood in reflection near the marker of the spot where Crazy Horse was stabbed in the back, both literally and metaphorically. At Fort Robinson, we stayed in officers’ quarters that dated back to 1870. From this fort we headed east to the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. En route, we toured the Museum of the Fur Trade and studied artifacts and documents from this economic and cultural relationship.

I cannot exaggerate how pleased my Lakota friends were that we came to inquire, listen, and learn from them. The Lakota, like so many aboriginal people, survived state-sponsored genocide. I believe the study of histories, philosophies, and cultures can help move us to a more constructive and more humanly dignified future. We cannot change the past, but, in honesty and shared reflection, we can create the possibility of a world rich with the prospects for liberty and justice for all.

The group shared an extraordinary experience during that week in May. One student, Scott Gang ’06, said the trip allowed him to learn using all of his senses and has left a profound impression on him. “I feel more spiritually connected to the Earth and its people, and I feel that I grew more in that eight-day period than in any other period I have experienced in my entire life.”