It was late on Tami Buffalohead-McGill’s 38th birthday, but instead of celebrating, she was spending this mid-January night frantically editing applications for Gates Millennium Scholarships. These annual scholarships — funded by Microsoft’s Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda — pay all college expenses for talented economically disadvantaged minority students. The applications needed to be postmarked by midnight.

Throughout the fall, Buffalohead-McGill, BA’89, Creighton’s director of student support services, and other Creighton employees and students had advised numerous high school seniors about the complex application process. They had aided many of these students in responding to the eight essay questions on leadership, service and academic goals. The final editing of these essays could make the difference between success and failure. Birthday

Creighton student Gertrude Lee, right, helps Miranda Short Bear, a student at Pine Ridge High School, edit her Gates Scholarship essay. Lee was one of several Creighton students who spent spring break on South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Reservation assisting high school juniors with their Gates Scholarship applications.

Attracting Gates Scholars

By Eileen Wirth, Ph.D.

Creighton has developed a “model program” to help economically disadvantaged high school students compete for the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship. And now many of them are coming to CU.
The Rev. Ray Bucko, S.J., and Tami Buffalohead-McGill, BA’89, are co-chairs of Creighton’s innovative Gates Scholarship mentoring program. They got the idea for the program during a nine-hour car ride to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.
festivities could wait.

But then a “party” showed up at Buffalohead-McGill’s Markoe Hall office. Creighton students and Native American twins Gertrude and Georgiana Lee and Joshua Marshall, an African-American/Native American English/philosophy major, volunteered to help with the editing.

“They said, ‘We should be mentors,’” said Buffalohead-McGill, who co-chairs Creighton’s mentoring program for Gates Scholarship applicants. “They were fabulous.” By the deadline, the group had edited more than five Gates applications and 40 essays.

Such dedication explains why Dr. Molly Tovar, director of the American Indian Graduate Center (AIGC) Scholars Program in Albuquerque, N.M., hails Creighton’s “model program” for helping deserving students win Gates Scholarships. AIGC selects Native American Gates recipients. Other ethnic organizations choose winners of their heritage.

“We wish other institutions would do what Creighton does,” said Tovar.

The scholarships pay all college expenses not funded by other programs and provide grants for low-income African-American, Hispanic-American, Native American and Asian American winners.
Attracting Gates Scholars

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Creighton’s intensive involvement with the Gates program began three years ago when AIGC chose Buffalohead-McGill as a scholarship reviewer with the goal of increasing applications from Nebraska and South Dakota, Tovar said. No Native American students from either state had won a Gates grant despite the significant Native American populations in both. That has changed.

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experience to help them close the gap and finish successfully.” They recruited volunteer faculty, staff and students as mentors.

Completing the 62-page Gates application would daunt the child of a college professor let alone students who are often the first college applicants in their families, said Buffalohead-McGill. Recipients also must provide a college acceptance letter and completed federal financial aid forms, both additional intimidating bureaucratic processes.

To take the mystery and fear out of applying for the Gates Scholarship, Creighton organized workshops attended by 101 eligible seniors in Omaha, Sioux City, the Santee Sioux and Winnebago Reservations and the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, she said. The workshops are open to students regardless of what university they hope to attend, but many eventually choose Creighton.

“We help them identify their service, leadership and work experiences,” said Buffalohead-McGill.

Last fall break, Buffalohead-McGill and Fr. Bucko tested an even more in-depth mentoring approach by taking 13 faculty and staff mentors to the Pine Ridge Reservation for an “immersion experience.” Native American Creighton students led the mentors on tours of the reservation. They stayed with the Jesuit community and spent several days working with students and visiting with families.

Buffalohead-McGill said that because Native American culture rejects boasting, mentors often must draw students out about their service and leadership. Students who have cared for elderly relatives or driven neighbors to doctors’ appointments view such things as an expected part of life rather than service. Mentors teach them how to explain their accomplishments in a way that will impress judges.

Mentors and workshop volunteers come from numerous Creighton colleges and departments. For example, last fall three pharmacy students drove to a workshop at Little Priest Tribal College at the Winnebago Reservation in northeast Nebraska, Buffalohead-McGill said. The School of Pharmacy

Portrait of a Mentor

Gary Michels, Ph.D., associate professor of chemistry, grew up in the Rapid City, S.D., area near the Pine Ridge Reservation but never knew much about Lakota culture until last fall when he accepted an invitation to spend fall break mentoring James Lays Bad, a Gates Scholarship applicant from Jesuit-run Red Cloud School.

Michels said the program appealed to him because “I wouldn’t be a gawking tourist. I had a purpose to go. I would be involved with the people.”

Michels said he faced a challenge because Lays Bad is not only Native American but had been raised in a very traditional Lakota manner. His first language is Lakota. He had even won an award for how well he spoke it. He was not as assimilated as many other students.

This meant that Lays Bad was “excessively humble” and very quiet, Michels said. Filling out an extensive application that demanded that he boast about his accomplishments and service to others was alien to his culture and values.

By talking to other people, Michels learned that Lays Bad had to chop wood for his family, drive his mother everywhere and generally take care of her. Prepared with this background, Michels helped Lays Bad outline his responses to the essay questions.

“We went through all eight essays,” said Michels. “I was exhausted.”

After returning to Creighton, Michels kept in touch with Lays Bad via e-mail but had received only one response as the deadline approached. When Lays Bad came to visit Creighton on a college recruiting trip, the two had lunch and talked about the Gates application.

“I built a fire under him. I told him he had to get more done,” said Michels. Lays Bad sent several responses to Buffalohead-McGill before Christmas. Right after Christmas break, he finished the application.

“He got it all done and his answers were wonderful,” said Michels.

Michels noted that when Lays Bad had started the application process, the University of Kansas was his first choice.

“When I looked at his final application, it said Creighton.”
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and Health Professions has a Native American health initiative and encourages students to volunteer for related projects such as this, said Victoria Roche, Ph.D., senior associate dean.

Creighton’s Cardoner Program, which promotes understanding of the meaning of vocation and involvement in service, will play a more active role in the Gates program next year, said Kristina DeNeve, Ph.D., director. “We are hoping to support this work and expand what they did last year,” she said. Cardoner might recruit students as mentors and possibly take them to a different reservation for an immersion experience.

Buffalohead-McGill said the Gates mentorship program is an example of “Creighton at its best.” Fr. Bucko agreed. “Ignatius says love shows itself more fully in action than in words. This allows the faculty to apply the gold standard and excellence in their service and commitment to their profession. Our program is amazing in that it shows the HEART of Creighton — willing to love in action rather than in words,” he said.

About the author: Dr. Wirth is chair of Creighton’s Department of Journalism and Mass Communication.