The Beginning of PLSI
Then known as the Special Scholarship Program in Law for American Indians, PLSI began in the fall of 1966. Dean Tom Christopher of the University of New Mexico School of Law noticed the lack of Native American attorneys and wanted to make a change beginning with addressing the lack of Native applicants to law school. At the time, only about 25 Native American attorneys could be identified. The task of developing such a program was given to Fred Hart, a visiting professor from Boston College Law School at the time. As the story goes, Hart declined at first but was convinced to develop the program by his wife, Joan. Joan noted that being involved in such a program would be one of the most important tasks that Hart could accomplish. Thanks to his wife's insistence, the lasting legacy of PLSI began to take shape.

Hart molded PLSI similarly to the Upward Bound Program, a summer program offered to high school and college bridge students. Originally, PLSI was open to both current undergraduates and those who had completed college, but it is now limited to applicants who have already taken the LSAT and applied to law school for the upcoming fall semester. A “boot camp” of sorts, the students were exposed to the rigors of law school, including the Socratic method, experience briefing cases, and lengthy readings. Hart also created the program to tackle the major barriers to law school for Native American applicants, such as addressing “imposter syndrome” and the lack of Native American attorney role models. Because of the systemic disadvantages for Native American applicants, PLSI created a path to law school based on students’ overall performance during the summer rather than the typical standard criteria for admission.
The reach of PLSI also extends beyond the AILC, with alumni across the country representing “a new generation of legal advocates for Indian country.” Ethel Branch (PLSI 2004), Navajo Nation attorney general, represents one of five Native American tribes to challenge President Donald Trump’s order to shrink Bears Ears National Monument. She is joined by Native American Rights Fund (NARF) Executive Director John Echowhawk (PLSI 1987) and Staff Attorney Matthew Campbell (PLSI 2005). NARF is a nonprofit created to protect the rights of Native American tribes. Together they hope to protect tribal sovereignty, defending the importance that the Bears Ears landscape has to each of the tribes involved in the lawsuit. This is also the reason why many Native American students went through PLSI in the first place, to give back to their tribes and improve the communities they come from. As AILC Director Helen Padilla has said, “An Indian attorney has a much more vested interest in advocating for their Indian clients and a better understanding of why a tribe might want to litigate or negotiate.”

The fight to raise tribal voices continues with Deb Haaland (PLSI 2003) and Sharice Davids (PLSI 2007), both of whom became the first Native American women elected to the U.S. House of Representatives for New Mexico and Kansas, respectively. Haaland previously served as the New Mexico Native American vote director for President Barack Obama’s re-election campaign in 2012. She has used her voice to call attention to fracking in Chaco Canyon, to protect her ancestral homeland. Davids was one of 16 selected to participate in the prestigious White House Fellowship program during the Obama-Trump transition and has competed as both an amateur and professional in Mixed Martial Arts.

The 50th PLSI Class
Fifty-two years after its founding, a new class of PLSI students completed the summer program and joined the ranks of those before them. PLSI is still housed at the University of New Mexico School of Law, and it recently celebrated the graduation of the 50th class. Like the decades of classes before them, students traveled from across the country to attend PLSI and join the larger network of 50 years of PLSI alumni. The students represented over 20 Native American tribes and sacrificed their summer in order to prepare themselves for what they faced ahead.

The next class of students will likely mirror the data from the American Bar Association, which sheds a light on the relatively small growth of Native American law student enrollees per year. From 1979-1980 to 2009-2010, enrollment grew from 392 to 1,273. The percentage of Native Americans in relation to the overall law student population is still small, with a jump from 0.32 percent to 0.82 percent from 1979-1980 to 2009-2010. Upon graduation, students will join the ranks of practicing Native American attorneys, which still comprise only 0.2 percent, or about 2,640 of the total 1.2 million attorneys in the United States as of 2010. While there has been growth within the Native American legal community, the comparison of Native American attorneys to the total number of attorneys in the United States is still small.

The Impact of PLSI
Recent graduates of the PLSI Class of 2018, Joseph Lugo and Kateri Wolfley, reflected on the impact PLSI had on them just one month later. “For me one of the best experiences was the people we were able to meet,” Lugo said. “It was the first experience I had where I met PLSI members who turned out to be lawyers and tribal judges, who were high up in the legal field. It was inspiring.”

Wolfley agreed, stating that “PLSI helped me gain confidence in my own ability to be an academic scholar, to know that I can do it. I don’t have any reservations after PLSI.”

The effects of PLSI still hold true even after graduation from law school. “I wouldn’t be where I am without PLSI,” Jannette Mondragón (PLSI 2015) said. “PLSI was a test for me, of whether I could
do law school or not. PLSI not only supported everything going on with my life and my move, but they also helped me to prepare for law school and learn how to be successful.” When asked whether PLSI changed her view on entering law school, Mondragón replied, “Before law school I thought I’d be alone. But instead I found comradesy, support, and community, and I didn’t know that existed in law school. After having found that in PLSI, I seek that out more and I’ve been able to have a strong support system even after law school.” Mondragón currently serves as assistant district attorney of the Thirteenth Judicial District of New Mexico.

Aaron Sims (PLSI 2011), an associate at Chestnut Law Offices P.A., also sought out community through PLSI. “PLSI really changed my perspective in unpacking my approach to education in order to give me the tools to prepare. In coming to law school, the perception of not knowing other attorneys changed in walking down the hall [of the American Indian Law Center],” he said. “To see the amount of Indian people who had gone through that program … it was powerful and motivating to know that I’m not alone and there’s other people out there.” When speaking further about his time in PLSI, Sims reflected that, “I really have to say thank you to Rodina [Cave Parnall] and Helen [B. Padilla] and the staff there and many of the staff and faculty before them who have volunteered over the many years to be part of the program. It really is an institute in Indian legal education … but Indian lawyers are still a fraction of the entire population. It all starts with the gateway at law school and it’s important to recognize the vision and longevity they’ve fought for in becoming a pipeline and keeping those doors open.”

Looking Forward
While Native American students still face significant barriers to receiving a legal education, it’s clear that PLSI has made a difference not only in the lives of students but also within the tribes and communities they represent in creating a pipeline to tribal sovereignty. PLSA has shown it is possible for Native American students not only to survive, but also truly succeed. Generations now have graduated from PLSI, going on to achieve their goals as practicing Native American attorneys. The need for more Native lawyers remains, but there is hope that the need could one day be met—so long as PLSI continues to develop and support accomplished Native American law students for the next 50 years and more. ☉

Jordan Oglesby (PLSI 2017, teaching assistant 2018) is a second-year law student at the University of New Mexico (UNM) School of Law and a member of the Navajo Nation. Oglesby currently serves as UNM Native American Law Student Association vice president and as a staff member of the Tribal Law Journal.

Endnotes
2Id.
4Id. at 286.
5Id.
6Id.
8Deloria, supra note 3, at 293. The AILC was later incorporated as an independent, Indian-controlled 501(c)(3) corporation separate from the UNM School of Law in 1977.
9Id.
10Id. at 294.
14Id.
17Id.
18Id.
19Id.
20Id.
21Id.
22Id.
24During 1987 and 1988, funding was cut and PLSI was unable to run the summer program. This explains the discrepancy between PLSI celebrating their 50th anniversary in 2017 and their 50th class in 2018.
26Id.
27Id.