Canada's First People aren't generally pleased by the history books.

It's not that historians have been unkind to native traditions, simply that writers have tended to short-shift their culture and their ways.

A new Malaspina College program is focusing on the First Nation perspective and its comparison to western views.

The two-semester program starts September at both the Nanaimo and Cowichan campuses and will carry on where traditional history books left off.

Native culture is touched on in the Grade 4 school curriculum, but otherwise it's largely neglected, says Ruth Kroek, Cowichan's program manager.

"A program like this promotes a sense of understanding of who natives are as a part of western civilization," says Kroek.

"We're trying to deliver a program that allows students to look at our philosophy, who we are and how we relate to our cultures."

Among the students already enrolled in the program are natives Louis Williams and Hannah George.

Both of the young adults remember sitting in Cowichan Valley classrooms, all too aware that their culture wasn't represented in the textbooks or school discussion.

"There isn't much written about natives, and what there is could be written better," said Williams.

"There is a fairly large population of native people in the Valley, so you would hope for something better."

Because history books are written by non-natives, Kroek hopes graduates of the college's Arts One-First Nations program will go on to complete their university studies.

"Eventually, they should be able to take part in recording history from a native perspective," she proposes. "European writers had their own ideas about what our culture was based upon and tried to superimpose their culture onto ours."

Both the church and Canada's early political leaders, she also asserts, were keen to see native culture trivialized and overlooked.

The two-semester college course is open to both natives and non-natives. In fact, Kroek believes the mix of cultures will help enliven debate in the tutorials which are key to the program.

Among the staff are two native instructors, including Richard Atleo, a well-known First Nations educator.

"The discussion can be quite powerful," says Kroek. "A program like this can make a significant difference for students."

A difference is what both Williams and George are hoping to make. Articulate and ambitious, they're weary of the stereotypes which paint natives as lazy.

A keen student, Williams remembers when his Grade 12 teacher expressed surprise that he was a native Indian.

"I found it shocking that he was a teacher who studied all walks of life and yet he came up with a question like that," said the 19-year-old.

He hopes to become a teacher and urges other natives to stay in school and improve their training.

"If you want to make money you have to go to school. Working at McDonald's doesn't cut it anymore."

George volunteered at Kokislaht Elementary, where 70 per cent of the students are natives. Once pondering a career in law, she's now determined to become a child psychologist.

"This program allows me to start my education and gives me the opportunity to learn more about my people," she said.

"No one really understands natives and what they are overcoming still. A lot of people don't want to hear about our problems."

The pair noted another stereotype casts all natives as talented carvers or dancers. The popularity of totems and native masks have painted a non-dimensional picture of Cowichan Tribes members.

"My friends sometimes say 'I guess you're good at spearing salmon,'" said Williams. "I don't even know how to spear fish."

Says Kroek: "Sometimes people don't go into any depths to understand us as individuals or how we relate or fit into the community."

The program is modelled after one at the University of B.C. and groups English, humanities and social sciences into a single unit.

Students and instructors work closely with one another for the full year, taking part in lectures, seminars and round table discussions.

Students can go on to continue their university studies in any number of directions. Kroek notes the course leads itself to those interested in education, law, child care and other career areas.

She was among three Cowichan Tribes members to graduate from Cowichan Secondary in 1973. This year, when Williams left the school, there were 12 band members among the graduation class.

Kroek sees hope in the numbers and believes initiatives like Arts One can make a difference — for natives and the community.

"It is an exciting time to be living in," she said. "It may not be progressing as quickly as some people would like, but it is progressing."