



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

HONORING NATIONS: 2000 HONOREE

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Motivated by the idea that Navajos should decide how their culture is preserved and protected, the Navajo Nation Archaeology Department partnered with nearby universities to create two Training Programs for Navajo students interested in careers in cultural preservation. The Programs combine academic training with field experience and are successfully expanding the pool of Navajo professionals qualified to work in key tribal cultural resource positions. In doing so, the Programs meet important community needs and add new perspectives to the fields of anthropology and archaeology.

In an effort to exert greater control over its cultural resources, the Navajo Nation created the Navajo Nation Archaeology Department (NNAD) in 1977. The Department, which oversees the largest American Indian cultural resource management program in U.S., facilitates historic preservation on the more than 16 million acres of Navajo lands. Its three offices annually conduct hundreds of archaeological survey and excavation projects to ensure that proposed development does not damage significant historical, archaeological or traditional cultural places.

Since its inception, the NNAD has played an important role in strengthening the Navajo Nation's cultural self-determination. By the late 1980s, however, the NNAD's leadership recognized a disturbing trend – only half of the NNAD's employees were Navajo, and among senior staff, less than 10 percent were Navajo. Worse yet, virtually no Navajo anthropologists or archaeologists were emerging through the university pipeline. Indeed, cultural preservation at Navajo and throughout Indian Country has been almost exclusively the domain of the Western scientific community, leaving Native peoples with little say over how their rich cultures are interpreted, recorded and transmitted. The NNAD knew that unless it took action, these important opportunities to interpret and protect Navajo history, identity and culture might slip further out of Navajo hands.

In thinking about how to increase the representation of Navajo citizens in cultural preservation positions, the NNAD made several strategic decisions. First, it decided that simply employing more Navajos in the NNAD – or advancing those already within the Department – would be unfeasible since few possessed the requisite academic credentials and training. Instead, the NNAD decided to focus on increasing the supply of qualified Navajos, a task that would take time but would have long-term benefits. Second, the NNAD decided that it must actively participate in the education and training of the next generation of Navajo anthropologists and archaeologists. Since several nearby universities had mandates

to work with local communities, and there were Navajo students majoring in anthropology and archaeology at these universities, the NNAD saw the desirability of institutional cooperation. By creating training programs at these institutions, the NNAD made it possible for Native students not only to take the necessary coursework but also to acquire the culturally specific tools and approaches that would make their work on Navajo lands most effective.

In 1988, the NNAD established its first Training Program in cooperation with Northern Arizona University (NAU) in Flagstaff, Arizona. In 1993, it established another program at the NNAD-Farmington office in cooperation with Ft. Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. Navajo students who are enrolled full-time at either institution and who are majoring in Anthropology or Indigenous Studies are eligible for part-time employment or internships with their school's respective NNAD Training Program. The Programs give practical work experience to Navajo undergraduate and graduate students through rigorous field and laboratory training. In the field, students acquire basic archeological inventory and excavation skills. Laboratory work includes artifact processing and analysis, basic computer skills and report preparation. The students also take field trips to important sites and attend lectures about a variety of topics, including the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and federal and tribal law. In all aspects of the Programs, NNAD encourages students to draw upon indigenous knowledge that has been historically, and unfortunately, devalued by Western-trained scientists.

The Training Programs have been successful on many fronts. First, the Programs are building a pool of qualified Navajo professionals who are prepared to take key tribal positions in cultural resource management. By providing one-on-one training, creating a supportive learning environment, and engaging students in community service, the Programs help insure degree completion. Navajo students participating in the Training Program at NAU are nearly four times as likely to complete their degree as their American Indian classmates across all majors. The combination of personalized academic training with practical application also gives the Programs' students a competitive advantage vis-à-vis other students (Native or non-Native) on the Navajo or open job market. Already, the Programs' graduates have taken positions in the Navajo Nation's Archaeology Department, Housing Authority, Historic Preservation Department and the Department of Natural Resources.

Second, the Programs meet important community needs. As part of their training, students contribute substantively to the NNAD's work. In 2000, students worked with NNAD archaeologists on Navajo Nation-contracted projects for the Bureau of Land Management, the State of Utah and Peabody Western Coal Company. The NNAD Training Programs also possess a student-based contracting service whereby Navajo citizens can hire students at subsidized cost to identify and map any historic, prehistoric, or traditional and culturally important places on land being considered for development. This service ensures that development will not disrupt or destroy sensitive or sacred sites. Another way the Programs give back to the community is through outreach and education. Students attend high school career days to encourage other Navajos to consider careers in cultural preservation, make presentations to youth groups, and produce educational materials (for example, an interactive CD-ROM that documents vandalism of traditional cultural places) to teach others about cultural resource management and good stewardship practices. In response to the high volume of inquiries about the Programs, one student is even developing a "How To" manual that will assist other tribes in developing similar training programs.

Third, the NNAD Training Programs are bringing fresh new perspectives and approaches to the fields of anthropology and archaeology. One of the most innovative features of the Training Programs is that the students' training is not limited to a Western academic

approach. Rather, the Programs embrace oral history and indigenous knowledge as valid anthropological approaches – and indeed believe they are essential for understanding and interpreting Navajo culture. Students are encouraged to draw upon the wisdom of their elders for their classes and in their fieldwork, to employ culturally appropriate techniques for handling (or in some cases, not handling) sacred objects, and to develop a better understanding of themselves and their culture. They are also encouraged to educate fellow students, teachers and others about how Navajo-controlled archaeology and anthropology play an essential role in preserving and enhancing Navajo history, values, practices and holy places for future generations. Students attest that their distinctly Navajo approach to cultural preservation is not always immediately welcomed by Western-trained scholars and students. At the same time, they feel that others are slowly coming to appreciate that Navajo approaches are as valid as they are different. For example, an ancient pot that had been discovered and analyzed by non-Navajo archaeologists was re-analyzed by a team from NNAD, who discovered that the prevailing interpretation of the pot's inscriptions was incorrect. The pattern did not represent a snake, but instead a traditional corn planting and harvesting method! In effect, the NNAD Training Programs are creating a cadre of well-qualified professionals who are not just archaeologists or anthropologists, but who are Navajo archaeologists and Navajo anthropologists. One can expect that this cadre will continue to challenge the status quo in ways that enhance these disciplines and fields of study.

At the core of this governance contribution is the idea that Navajos ought to be in a position to decide how their culture is to be protected and preserved. The NNAD's efforts to empower the Navajo people to control their cultural future on their own terms and with their own set of highly qualified professionals exemplifies a genuine commitment to self-determination.

Lessons:

- Assuming greater management control over cultural resources and increasing tribal stewardship of these resources are important objectives. Tribal governments should empower their citizens with the skills necessary to lead these efforts.
- Tribally supported training programs are an effective means for increasing the supply of qualified Native professionals across many different fields. Tribes and educational institutions can develop partnerships in which students can combine academic training with practical, on-reservation fieldwork.
- Indian nations need not rely on outsiders to analyze, interpret and transmit their unique cultures. There is tremendous value in creating Native approaches to scholarship and building the corpus of indigenous knowledge.

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