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THE STORY OF DISTANCE LEARNING AT SALISH KOOTENAI COLLEGE

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Introduction

Salish Kootenai College (SKC) is located on the Flathead Reservation in Western Montana and is home to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The reservation is a beautiful area located around the southern half of Flathead Lake and is known as a destination-point recreation area. The Flathead Reservation has a total population of approximately 22,000, of whom 6,000 are of Indian descent. Unlike the other six Indian reservations in Montana, the majority of people living on the Flathead Reservation are not tribal members. Of the Indian population, 3,500 are enrolled members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The reason so many non-tribal members and non-Indians now live on the Flathead Reservation is that in 1910 the reservation was forcibly opened to homesteading by non-Indians who could claim surplus land. This came after some of the land had been allotted, through the 1887 Dawes Act, to individual tribal families (Salish Kootenai College [SKC], 2001-2003, p. 4). It seems that a great many people wanted to live on the beautiful Flathead Reservation.

SKC began in 1977 as a small branch campus of Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC), offering 45 credits to 49 students at seven sites around the reservation. It operated as such until 1981, when it severed ties with FVCC. Since that time, SKC has grown from a small branch campus with few degree options to its present size, which includes a new arts center, a science facility, and a golf course. The degree options now include 4 bachelor degrees, 15 associate degrees, and 7 certificate programs serving 1,100 students, many of whom are not American Indian (SKC, 2001-2003, p. 8).

Mission Statement of SKC

The mission of SKC is to provide quality postsecondary education opportunities for Native Americans locally and throughout the United States. The College will strive to provide opportunities for individual self-improvement to promote and help maintain the cultures of the Confederated Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation. (SKC, 2001-2003, p. 8)

SKC is dedicated to assisting the tribal government and individual tribal members whenever possible to improve the quality of life on the Flathead Reservation. SKC assists in economic development by providing many forms of vocational education and higher education to tribal members and by participating in various types of research when requested by the tribal government. Of equal importance is the special effort SKC puts forth to help maintain and enhance the culture, language, and heritage of the Salish and Kootenai tribes.

The Story: Engaging Learners Through Distance Education

Dr. Joe McDonald helped found SKC and has been its president since its inception in 1977. He has provided inspirational leadership to SKC over the last 25 years and has been a leader of the national movement by American Indian people to gain control of higher education for their people. At various times during the past 25 years, Dr. McDonald also has been the president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), the national organization of the tribally controlled colleges and universities (TCU) movement.

Working in the background with Dr. McDonald as SKC's academic vice-president is Jerry Slater, who has been equally important to SKC's development as a first-rate TCU. Dr. McDonald often refers to Jerry Slater as the backbone of the college; and in Montana, their long partnership at SKC has become known as the "Joe and Jerry Show." They have been a creative team for some 25 years and have built, with much help from their advisory board, faculty, students, and community, what many in the higher education world consider one of the best TCUs in the country. Yet with all of SKC's successes—and it is successful and serves as a model for other American Indian nations that would like to start a college—Dr. McDonald and Slater recognize that there are many people on their own reservation who are not being served adequately because of the many problems still facing place-bound Indian students, such as lack of transportation and child care.

In seeking an answer to the problem of how to reach place-bound students on the Flathead Reservation, the idea of a permanent distance-learning program was put forth in 1993. SKC had had a number of successful experiences with several forms of distance-learning dating back to 1981 and 1982, when it implemented branch campuses

on the Rocky Boy and Fort Belknap Indian reservations at the request of their tribal governments. Also in 1985, SKC offered distance-education courses to citizens of the Flathead Indian Reservation via CSKC-TV, a tribal low-power public television station. Dr. Michael O'Donnell, a long time faculty member and program director at SKC, was asked to develop the idea into a program (W. K. Kellogg Foundation & SKC, 2001, p. 2). Dr. O'Donnell commented on the importance of this initiative: "They [SKC] were serving the poorest of the poor with this distance-learning program. Nobody else wants them, so we have the market all to ourselves" (personal interview, January 9, 2002). Once SKC decided that a distance-learning program was needed and a director was assigned the task of developing it, several distance-learning models were examined as examples of what could be done to serve place-bound students. Examined were TV-based courses, video and written correspondence courses, and computer-based distance-learning courses. Dr. McDonald, Slater and Dr. O'Donnell, and the SKC Eagle Project leadership team decided after researching many options that the one viable method that would enable SKC to reach the most place-bound students was computer-based distance-learning courses (J. MacDonald, personal interview, January 8, 2002).

While the important work of developing a learning and teaching strategy was being worked out, SKC still lacked an important piece of the puzzle of providing services to place-bound students—that is, the necessary resources to shift such a venture out of the planning stage and into operation. In 1995, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation undertook a major educational initiative with the TCUs called the Native American Higher Education Initiative (NAHEI). NAHEI's multifaceted focus was to provide TCUs an opportunity to decide for themselves what was important for their communities. NAHEI

funds would then provide planning opportunities, technical assistance, and resources to carry out those plans. SKC's planning team saw this as a timely opportunity for them to plan, develop, and begin their distance-learning program.

The unique leadership style at SKC is one of the most compelling aspects to emerge from the story as told by the distance-learning programmatic staff and faculty of the Distance Education Department of SKC. The basic leadership philosophy and theme of President McDonald, Vice-President Slater, and Distance Education Department Head O'Donnell, as stated by Drs. McDonald and O'Donnell, is to just turn the program over to the program staff and faculty charged with doing the work. Once the initial planning and financing were done, step out of their way, give them the responsibility for decision-making, and let them run with that ball (personal interviews, January 8 & 9, 2002). Senior administrators of SKC truly believe that initiative on the part of their staff and faculty could produce outstanding results.

The initiative, commitment, and hard work of faculty, staff, and students continue to generate support from SKC administrators. One of the things heard repeatedly from senior administrators on SKC's campus was that they were proud of their staff and faculty and the leadership they projected through the distance-learning program (J. McDonald & M. O'Donnell, personal interviews (January 8 & 9, 2002). O'Donnell further stated,

It is the staff, the faculty, and even students who willingly focus and put in the time to better themselves and better the program's delivery system. It's why we are in turn so willing to work hard to find the resources necessary to maintain a long-term and successful distance-learning program. (January 8 & 9, 2002)

Dr. O'Donnell gave Dr. Lori Lambert, Assistant Director of the Distance Education Program, much of the credit for the success of the program and said unabashedly, "Lori is the brains behind this project." The Sloan Foundation, which has become a major supporter of distance-learning projects around the world, recently selected Dr. Lambert as the asynchronous teacher of the year. This is quite an honor for Dr. Lambert and SKC's distance-learning program.

Dr. Lambert stated, "Some of the most challenging of the pedagogical and technological concerns that she has had to manage are the expectations of SKC faculty" (personal interview, January 8, 2002). SKC faculty member Pat Hurley illustrated one of those concerns:

When SKC faculty are first introduced to distance-learning they want to go hi-tech as soon as possible, learning to use the very latest technology on the market. They want video, sound, and all the other neat technology to send their coursework out on-line. What the faculty soon discovered is that the telephone lines their students are using are too old and so slow. It takes hours and hours for many homebound students to download just one picture, or one sound file, or a video so they can get on with their class assignments. (personal interview, January 9, 2002)

Dealing with these sorts of issues led to the distance-learning planning committee and the staff's decision to conduct a technological needs assessment for their program. Identifying the delivery platforms to be used became even more important as SKC eventually began delivering coursework across a broader terrain, primarily in the United States and Canada. Dr. Lambert stated:

In other words, you can beam all kinds of distance-learning courses out there via computer networks and television, but if there is nobody out there that can receive it, what is the point? You had better also find out what your potential market is for the

coursework being developed and what potential students can receive from you. That will dictate to you your delivery system and/or a variety of delivery systems that you might be able to put out there. (personal interview, January 8, 2002)

In 1988, the Eagle Project planning committee did an in-depth assessment of their potential student body and SKC's ability to deliver computer distance-learning coursework to place-bound students. They found that, in 1998, an insignificant number of American Indians were graduating from any college with bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degrees in the sciences, mathematics, engineering, or technology (SMET). American Indians were being left behind in the changeover to the information age that the world had begun moving into for the new millennium. They also found that when TCUs (including SKC) offered courses in SMET programs students enrolled in and filled those classes to capacity. It was clear that the TCUs were the best venue for reservation-based students to begin a career in one of the SMET disciplines.

The second phase of the assessment involved finding the best delivery system to reach the most possible students on the reservation. It quickly became clear that the distance-delivery system had to be compatible with what students could afford and actually use on the reservation. It was the information from the assessment that eventually led SKC to begin the switchover from personal computers to Macintoshes because SKC distance-learning faculty and students found them more comfortable to use in the distance-education program (O'Donnell, 2002).

SKC's distance-learning program is now in its fourth year of operation, offers 125 asynchronous courses, and is available and accessible 24 hours a day. As of Spring 2002, they were developing another 52 courses. Some of the diverse courses currently

being offered by the Distance Education Department are aquatic biology, Basic Kootenai I, Basic Salish II, calculus I, computer literacy, educational psychology, elementary microbiology/lab, forest botany, history of tribal governments, introduction to zoology, and job-seeking skills. The distance-learning program now offers two areas of degree-bearing study: an A.A. in Human Services and an A.A. in Environmental Science.

On the surface, SKC's Distance Education Department seems the same as most others, so what makes distance-learning education at SKC unique? What lives are being touched, and how? According to Dr. O'Donnell, "The answers to those questions lie in the partnerships, internal and external, that SKC has nurtured to bring about its distance-learning program" (personal interview, January 9, 2002).

The first partnerships that had to be formed were internal partnerships with in-house SKC faculty. Pedagogical issues, cultural issues, hardware, software, and delivery issues all had to be settled in-house before the distance-learning program could be shared. Even with the leadership of Dr. McDonald, Jerry Slater, Dr. O'Donnell, and Dr. Lambert, a solid supportive faculty was needed to develop more than 100 courses across a broad spectrum of the Human Services and Environmental Study disciplines and to deliver to a place-bound student body. The SKC faculty needed to become believers in the distance-learning program and to become partners in the effort to develop a viable distance-learning program. The success of the initiative was dependent on faculty who were invested emotionally and intellectually in what was being asked of them.

SKC's leadership team was able to form an effective partnership with the college's faculty that is producing solid courses for the Distance Education Department. SKC faculty are given the time and resources to produce quality distance courses for the Eagle Project; the relationship is built on trust and reward. Patricia Hurley related, "It took a bit of time, experience, and trial-and-error, but we have pretty much figured out what needs to be done for faculty to produce quality courses and a quality experience for those faculty that teach the courses" (personal interview, January 9, 2002).

In developing external partnerships, one of the first goals of the Distance Education Department staff was to avoid political issues in all of their manifestations. For instance, they avoided confrontations with other TCUs by not duplicating their coursework and possibly siphoning off their students. SKC avoided this by developing and offering distance coursework in the third and fourth year of Human Services and Environmental Studies that TCUs in Montana and around the country were generally not offering their students. Where TCUs in the region have developed one- or two-year Environmental Studies or Human Service degrees, students from those institutions can enroll only in third- and fourth-year distance-learning coursework from SKC. Another area that SKC observes and analyzes constantly is the pressure to expand too quickly. Pressure comes from in-house as other academic departments of SKC seek to build distance-learning into their programs and from outside as local businesses and tribal programs seek coursework to support their efforts. President McDonald, Vice-President Slater, and Dr. O'Donnell move carefully when requested to develop more coursework, making decisions based on resource availability and partnership possibilities before committing SKC to additional distance-learning course development.

Because of its distance-learning staff and faculty, SKC has become one of the leading institutions nationwide in providing distance-learning educational opportunities. To maintain a vigorous program, SKC has developed a strong in-house service-training program. Michelle Mitchell, network technician, related, "We must constantly train faculty. Most of our faculty are first-timers using technology to teach distance courses. They have come to see us as a sanctuary of sorts where they can come in and plug in their laptops and get assistance when they need it" (personal interview, January 8, 2002). Many tribal institutions are now interested in how SKC became so versed in distance-learning, what they are doing to maintain their high standards, and how they might replicate what SKC has accomplished. In fact, many SKC staff and faculty have been asked to serve as consultants and trainers for other institutions that are interested in distance-learning programs. They have given workshops at conferences and at postsecondary educational institutions in the United States, Canada, Australia, Norway, and Finland.

An important goal of SKC's distance-learning program, and a general mission of SKC, is to assist in the preservation and enhancement of the Salish and Kootenai people's languages and cultures for future generations of tribal members. In all distance-learning courses offered by SKC, every effort is made to implement an aspect of culture(s), whether it is the students themselves bringing something into the class concerning tribal culture(s) or teachers implementing it directly into the lesson plan.

For example, students have cultural input into their anatomy class. In this case, the instructor frames her or his initial question in such a way as to encourage the sharing of cultural nuances: "How does your tribe use skins?" The first reaction by a Plains

American Indian student might be, “Why do tribal members from other regions call them skins? Why don’t they call them hides like we do?” A discussion follows, through which students learn that different tribes use all kinds of skins or hides, not just buffalo, elk, or deer hides. Tribes from other regions of North America use all manner of skins, including bird skin. Hides and skins are prepared in many different ways, some very different from the methods used by the Plains Indians.

The lesson evolves in such a way that students gain not only a clear understanding of the anatomy of the animal, but also the meaning of the gift of the animal in donating the hide or skin, and the processes different tribes use to harvest skins and hides. In this class, the instructor asks the students to explain how their tribal elders taught them to harvest and butcher an animal to get the best possible use from the skin or hide. This is important storytelling that includes tribal, cultural, and scientific lessons that create cultural pride and ensure the passing of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Dr. Lambert stated, “Creativity is the norm from our instructors and students as they work through a distance-learning course” (personal interview, January 8, 2002).

Kim Barber, a student support services staff member, spoke about another goal of SKC: to provide quality service to its distance-learning students. She is the lead person in providing service to the students, and she brings to her job the added perspective of having taken distance-education courses when she herself was a student. Thus, she understands the student’s perspective. She shared, “There is nothing like doing it yourself to truly learn what the student is going through as they study via distance-learning” (personal interview, January 9, 2002). Kim Barber further explained that every administrator and staff person of the Distance Education Department learns the

procedures of processing students as they enroll in the distance-learning program. They learn to sign them up, give them a tutorial about the program, and explain what is expected of them as students.

Kim Barber also talked about the challenges of serving students over great distances and voiced two specific concerns. One, if a student needs federal student financial aid from SKC, the student must come all the way to SKC to pick up the financial-aid check. SKC's point is that if the student is already place-bound and is taking a distance-learning course for this reason, the bureaucratic requirement, which forces the student to travel up to 500 miles one way, defeats the whole purpose of distance-learning. Federal financial-aid programs have yet to fully consider the needs of students in distance-learning programs. Navigating these requirements places a huge burden on students, and SKC has yet to find an answer to these issues.

The second concern troubling the Distance Education Department is how to better advise its distance-learning students. The students living on the Flathead Reservation can come to the home office at least once during the academic quarter and spend quality time with the distance-learning staff during a mentoring session. But how can staff provide quality mentoring once a quarter to a student who lives 500 hundred miles away? Kim Barber explained that they attempt to provide advising and mentoring on-line, but she and the staff know this is not the same as looking students in the eye and reading their body language when discussing their educational opportunities. The value of a face-to-face experience is evident. Kim Barber was upbeat in her conversation about this because she was confident that they would find a better way to serve their students.

Dave Burland, a distance-learning computer technician and a self-taught tech whiz, told one of the most interesting and compelling parts of SKC's distance-learning story. Burland taught himself, in his basement, how to be a computer technician, after deciding at age 40 that he was tired of the rigors of construction work and he wanted to find an easier way to make a living. Basically, what he did was buy old computers, take them home, tear them apart to see how they were built and what made them work, and then put them back together again. He explained, "This gave me the right 'can do' attitude and approach to handling the distance-learning program's computer-tech upkeep needs, as well as being able to assist students with their computers" (personal interview, January 9, 2002). One of the most serious challenges faced by SKC and their distance-learning students is the availability of professional technology service at the college and across the reservation's isolated locations. Burland's ability to troubleshoot technical problems is one of the most important aspects of keeping the distance-learning program up and running on a daily basis.

Although SKC's Distance Education Department has effectively addressed political boundaries, curriculum challenges, and access dilemmas, a major programmatic issue that they continue to face is the ongoing work of financial sustainability. They have had to build everything from the ground up, and until NAHEI came along, adequate funding resources were not available to build a strong, high-quality distance-learning program. A lesson learned is that initiating and sustaining a distance-learning program is an expensive endeavor. Dr. O'Donnell reinforced this fact by explaining,

One of the things you hear about distance-learning is, "Oh, we can serve so many more students and generate all of this revenue to pay for its startup." That may or may not be true, but I will guarantee you what is also true is, it is very expensive to start a distance-

learning program and keep it going. As an administrator for the college, you must ask yourself, how are we going to pay for this startup and keep it going? (personal interview, January 9, 2002)

To ensure fiscal stability, SKC has taken a pragmatic view that there is no point in providing a distance-learning program if you do not have enough students to have the program pay for itself. Dr. McDonald stated, "SKC will not allow any program to become a drain on the institution. It treats and assesses the distance-learning program the same as other programs. It is not isolated; it is part of the whole fabric of the college" (personal interview, January 8, 2002). The department requires that every distance-learning course offered must have at least six students enrolled to ensure that it comes close to paying for itself as a stand-alone entity. And because student enrollment is essential to the life of the distance-learning program, the staff has identified the eventual need for a student recruiter. Dr. Lambert said, "Currently, students are recruited mostly by word of mouth and by online offerings, but the Northwest Accrediting Association has recommended a more strategic plan will be needed in the long term to grow the distance-learning student body, and we agree that it will be essential to our department's future" (personal interview, January 8, 2002). Dr. O'Donnell explained that you have to stay on top of distance-learning because of the cost factor:

After you have the initial program up and running, you then must develop a strategy for its continuation. Outside funding sources are eventually going to drop out. If you have enough students to keep it running, wonderful. If you don't, then you'd better start figuring out other ways to keep it going if you really want it. It is a big challenge. Even with NAHEI's support, SKC has had to use real initiative in getting its Distance Education Department functioning at a high quality level. Each staff person has had to do whatever is necessary to get the job done on a daily basis. (personal interview, January 9, 2002)

An important next step for the program, Drs. O'Donnell and Lambert stressed, is a comprehensive formative and summative evaluation, which must be an ongoing feature of a distance-learning program. Each indicated that the program must be constantly seeking to improve itself as it goes along, and it must do an annual summative evaluation to measure how it has done over the previous year. Constant evaluation of distance-learning programs is critical due to the extensive investment of money, time, effort, and student involvement in the program. Continuous assessment can also enhance and sustain student enrollment, faculty development, course development, and funding, all of which are ongoing concerns for any distance-learning program.

Lessons Learned

The story of SKC's entrance into the field of distance-learning is a source of inspiration and encouragement for all TCUs and other small institutions of higher education that desire to serve the poorest of the poor. It has shown that great obstacles can be overcome with desire, hard work, and intelligent thought. SKC's journey into the field of distance-learning also has yielded some important lessons for any other TCU or small institution wishing to serve American Indian students who are place-bound, but still want to improve their lives through hard work and educational opportunity.

Major lessons learned are as follows:

1. Planning, and then more planning, must go into the effort to initiate a distance-learning project. A realistic assessment of the school's resources must be made before any commitments are made for faculty to deliver such coursework.
2. Financial resources must be secured from outside the school's normal resource pool. Funding a start-up distance-learning project is expensive, and keeping it financially stable is a constant challenge.
3. Administrators must understand the time commitment for faculty who are recruited to develop the distance-learning course. Faculty dedicated to a distance-learning project will have little time for anything else during the semester.
4. Fulfilling students' needs is a major challenge that only escalates as the student body grows within the distance-learning project. Serving a student body that is spread over a large geographic area presents real problems with financial aid as it is currently regulated by the federal government. Advising and mentoring must take place primarily on-line, and students' technical problems are difficult to address long distance.
5. Technology itself is a real concern because the school must choose brands of hardware and software, as well as tech service providers. Each decision in this area locks the school in for the near (and possible far) future because it involves an expensive financial commitment on the part of the project's directors. A mistake here can be devastating to a beginning project because of the expenses involved.

There are other lessons to be learned, as well, but the preceding ones are examples of elements that must be taken into account by planners at schools desiring a distance-learning program.

In the end, SKC's greatest concern is where will the resources come from in the future to sustain the Distance Education Department? Dr. O'Donnell described the future of SKC's distance-learning project:

Sometimes the future looks grim for long-term funding of our Eagle Project [now the Distance Education Department of SKC] because this program is, at times, hard to financially sustain, but we have faith in ourselves and Dr. McDonald, who is fearless when it comes to taking on new challenges. He tells us, "Go do the work, and I'll find the resources somewhere." To date he always has! (personal interview, January 9, 2002)

Dr. Wayne J. Stein is an Associate Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Center for Native American Studies at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana. He works closely with the tribal communities, tribal governments, and the seven tribal colleges of Montana on a wide variety of topics and programs. Dr. Stein formerly served as president of Standing Rock College and as Vice-President for Academic Affairs at Ft. Berthold Community College, both tribally controlled colleges in North Dakota. Dr. Stein's tribal affiliation is Turtle Mountain Chippewa.

Mike Jetty is an enrolled member of the Spirit Lake Dakota Nation and a descendent of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa/Cree. He has been working in the field of Indian Education for over ten years in varying capacities, a teacher, researcher, and was also a Title I Improvement/ Indian Education Issues Specialist with the Montana Office of Public Instruction. He currently teaches multicultural education at Montana State University-Bozeman where he is completing his doctorate in Educational Leadership. In addition to extensive background knowledge about general Indian education issues/school improvement issues, Mike has detailed experience in working with the teaching/learning of Native languages.

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