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THE STORY OF CROWNPOINT INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY AND ITS ALTERNATIVE LIVESTOCK PROGRAM

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The prophecies of the old people say that once things are not the same anymore, it would be the end of our culture, and it appears that we are heading in that direction. A sign of such changes are the corncobs. When the kernels in the cob are not aligned, things are not in harmony. The prophecy tells us that once things become that way, it's a sign that the Diné culture is becoming extinct. And that really is a concern for me and people my age. Of course the younger people are not really aware of it. So, the Alternative Livestock program, in small ways, is contributing to hanging on to our culture, reintroducing the harmonious relationships between the animal, the earth, the sun, and all other elements. (Janis Perry, CIT cultural advisor, personal interview, February 2002)

Introduction

In July 1979, Crownpoint Institute of Technology (CIT) was first established as the Navajo Skill Center. CIT is located in the eastern region of the Navajo Nation in Crownpoint, New Mexico. From the beginning, CIT's goal was to offer quality instruction in technical and vocational education. The college became an independent tribal entity in 1981. The State of New Mexico chartered CIT as a non-profit, private corporation, and a five-member board of directors governed the college. The following year, the Navajo Nation chartered and established CIT as a tribally controlled college.

Twenty-three years later, CIT has expanded its mission but holds on to its fundamental values of providing quality higher education, service, and commitment to the Navajo Nation and surrounding areas.

The Crownpoint Institute of Technology is a tribal college established and chartered by the Navajo Nation. The Crownpoint Institute of Technology will prepare Navajo and other students with a quality technical and vocational education, associate degree, or community education in a higher learning setting. The college is committed to providing a student-oriented learning environment, based on Dine' philosophy. (Crownpoint Institute of Technology Catalog, 2002, <http://cit.cc.nm.us>)

Today, CIT offers 17 programs of study. During its first year, CIT students explore a variety of technical and vocational programs. The second year of study, students focus and concentrate on a technical or vocational program that will lead them to an associate's degree.

In 1991, in an effort to establish a Veterinary Technology program that would have a tremendous impact on the Navajo Nation and the Crownpoint community, James Tutt, CIT president, and Jay DeGroat, CIT development officer, recruited Dr. Clint Balok, head of CIT's Veterinary Technology program, to augment CIT's mission. Today, the Veterinary Technology program consists of a one-year certificate program (Veterinary Assistant) and a two-year associate degree program (Veterinary Technician).

The Veterinary Technology curriculum includes an intensive natural sciences and mathematics core background and supervised clinical and laboratory experiences. Leon Porter, CIT Special Project Director and instructor, explained that

the first year [the students] go through a lot of classroom theory and a lot of hands-on experience here. Then that summer they go out and work in the veterinarian clinic or in some area that is associated with the Veterinary Technology program. They can do an

internship on an alternative livestock farm, an elk farm, or they could do their internship here. They come back for their second year, which gives them a lot of the science background and an associate degree, but they can choose either program. (personal interview, February 2002)

The goal of the Veterinary Technology program is to prepare students with a strong background in the natural sciences and mathematics, which could be valuable for those who plan to pursue veterinarian careers or graduate work leading to a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) degree. The Veterinary Technology program provides the basic scientific and technical instruction necessary for students to become veterinary assistants, veterinary technicians, or the opportunity to pursue graduate studies in veterinary medicine. The Veterinary Technology program is proposing to apply for either or both full accreditation or approved status from the American Veterinary Medical Association, Council on Education (AVMA COE). Dr. Balok explained that CIT “students would sit for a national board exam [to become] certified animal health technicians.” An accredited Veterinary Technology program would allow CIT students to earn their credentials by taking the veterinary technician examination of any state in the United States.

Background on the Alternative Livestock Program

The Alternative Livestock program is one of CIT’s pioneer initiatives in not only revitalizing the Navajo culture, but also in preparing veterinary technicians who are highly specialized in elk management. The Alternative Livestock program at CIT was made possible through the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s Native American Higher Education Initiative (NAHEI), which gave all tribal colleges a chance to realize their

dreams. CIT used the NAHEI grant to start an elk ranch, which is located at the top of the majestic Zuni Mountains shared with the Zuni near Gallup, New Mexico.

According to James Tutt, CIT president, both elk and deer are sacred to the Navajo people and have always been part of the Navajo culture. Ancient links with the elk have been found in the West Mesa petroglyphs, near Mount Taylor. The drawings on the rocks date from as early as 1350-1680 AD and show that people and antler animals once shared the same land and air. Jeremy DeGroat related traditional stories of the Navajo people and their domesticated elk sharing the same land: "Somewhere, sometime, something happened and the elk returned into the wild. The elders believed that sometime in the future men and elk would become one again" (personal interview, February 2002). Perhaps CIT is fulfilling the prophecy that animals and humans will become one again.

CIT is the first college to prepare students in their own elk-ranch facility (or park as some define it). Perhaps most unique, it is the first park to provide hands-on educational experiences to students through the Alternative Livestock program. Much of the success is attributed to CIT's ability to connect culture and student experiences with education. Traditionally, we think of classroom learning as involving textbooks. However, at CIT the Alternative Livestock program is unique in its pedagogical content. Jeremy DeGroat, a former CIT student, shared, "We work with the animals at the same time we are learning the course alternative livestock. Alternative livestock is its own course. When we go to work with them, at the same time we are learning" (personal interview, February 2002).

Moreover, in a small way the Alternative Livestock program is a course on Navajo culture and traditions. According to Janis Perry, CIT elder, the elk project is a unique learning program in that it provides cultural lessons. She supports the program because the elk is being used in the Navajo way (for meat, and use of antlers for medicinal purposes). Traditionally when one eats the meat, the bone is carefully removed to be recycled back into the earth. The bone then becomes a fertilizing agent for plants and trees. Janis sees the elk project as a way to teach the process of using the elk's meat, antlers, and body parts in a culturally appropriate way. Teaching the Navajo culture to the younger generation is an important role for Janis and CIT.

Including CIT, there are currently 12 elk parks in New Mexico. The growth in such parks came as a result of a burgeoning interest in the potential of elk as a profitable industry and the Alternative Livestock elk management program at CIT. Dr. Balok continuously promotes the elk industry by giving presentations and tours to potential elk investors. The Jicarilla Apache Tribe and Southern Ute Indian Reservation in Colorado have shown an interest in CIT's Alternative Livestock program. Currently, the "Navajo people's paradigm is in raising sheep and goats for profit, and the paradigm shift will be when they start looking at new programs as beneficial and as something that will help move the community along," said Leon Porter (personal interview, February 2002).

The elk industry has the potential to revolutionize Navajo communities by replacing traditional cattle farms. The greatest advantage of raising elk over cattle lies in its economic potential. Elk are worth more than 5 to 10 times the price of cattle. The amount of land needed to raise cattle ranges in the thousands of acres, compared to 60 to 100 acres for elk. Elk provide lean meat, velvet antler and hard antler sales, and

animal sales for trophy sports. A noneconomic reason for raising elk is the nutritional value of elk meat. Reports indicate higher instances of diabetes among the Navajos in comparison with the United States population in general raise the value of reintroducing the elk in the community (Indian Health Services, 2001 http://www.ihs.gov/medical_programs/diabetes/navajomodel.asp; National Diabetes Education Program, 2000, www.ihs.gov/medicalprograms/diabetes/americanindiandm%2Dfinalyr.htm). This is important when one considers the dramatic statistics Porter mentioned.

The Beginning of a Dream

The strength and soul of the Alternative Livestock program and CIT can be found in the dreams of its administrators, faculty, students, and community. Dreams become a reality when they exist in an environment of faith, support, and commitment. According to CIT President James Tutt, "People have visions, and I think that's what you have to really trust in and you have individuals who have to believe in it. We all have to pull together in order to get there. It wasn't an 'I' situation; we were all in it or none at all. I think that's where it all started" (personal interview, February 2002). The dream of the Alternative Livestock program began with Dr. Clint Balok, who spent most of his career working with elk and Native Americans. He said,

I've seen young Navajos walk into a pen with wild horses [in a] slow and calm, deliberate manner and [in] a very short time have one of those animals basically under control. I just think that is a tremendous skill, and I thought it was a skill that we needed to develop. (personal interview, February 2002)

Working as a team, President Tutt, Jeremy DeGroat, Dr. Balok, Leon Porter, and others came together to generate ideas on how to make the Alternative Livestock program a reality.

Vital components of making the dream happen at CIT were support from institutional leaders, financial contributions, and community acceptance. President Tutt's philosophy is to "let people dream and you dream, and you support it. I think that's a way to get things accomplished" (personal interview, February 2002). Leadership and support from CIT administrators were present; however, the need for financial help was a priority. "We had a little storage building donated to us by a uranium mining company here, and that was our classroom and our hospital. That was our beginning, and we knew that we had to have some kind of financial help to accomplish anything," said Dr. Balok (personal interview, February 2002). A significant event for CIT was when tribal colleges became recognized as land grant institutions in 1994. The land grant recognition gave CIT credibility when competing and negotiating with larger universities for grants. Attaining financial support allowed CIT the opportunity to improve its facilities and position in the academic funding stream.

Self-determination and autonomy are rights that matter to CIT and all tribal colleges. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation grant provided the first real opportunity for CIT to determine its needs as a college and the best way to address them. Referring to the Kellogg Foundation and its grant to CIT, President Tutt shared,

The liberty that you have is an option. They don't really tie in what you can do with it, and I think it was pretty flexible and we got what we needed to get done. That was a very good idea, rather than have you restricted to 'do this, do this, do that' and all of that; it is

very difficult to jump through those loops. But it's easier to say, if you're given that opportunity to develop what you really believe in, I think it really helps when it comes to a test. (personal interview, February 2002)

Before receiving the Kellogg Foundation grant, CIT was ignored or at the mercy of larger universities and their ideas. The progress of the Alternative Livestock project was significant in that it gave CIT leaders the confidence that they could dream and succeed.

Several challenges and obstacles arose during the journey of making the Alternative Livestock project a success. At the beginning, CIT had trouble coming up with innovative ideas on how to make use of the money from the Kellogg Foundation grant. The fear of going out on their own for the first time and taking a chance was a topic of discussion at many meetings. According to Dr. Balok,

I think there was some reluctance in our house to try and do something on our own, because it was imminent that we were probably going to fail. My question to the group was, What do we have to lose? I mean, we have nothing right now and if we end up with nothing other than our self-respect, then that is fine. (personal interview, February 2002)

In the midst of uncertainty and confusion, Dr. Balok called the Kellogg Foundation to ask for advice. The advice Dr. Balok received was to leave his comfort zone and begin to think outside of the box. The Alternative Livestock program is exactly that—it's a one-of-a-kind program found only at CIT.

The final obstacle in the early stages of the Alternative Livestock program consisted of battling the State of New Mexico and finding land on which to situate the elk farm. At

the inception of the program, there was a moratorium on the importation of elk to New Mexico. In addition to the moratorium, which slowed down progress, finding land for the elk became a major obstacle. The original idea was to find land on or near the CIT campus. This proved to be a long and difficult process. CIT spent the first year being bogged down by tribal governing committees in attempting to find land for the elk. Running out of options, CIT decided to partner with Dr. Balok who owned land in the mountains a half-hour away from the school.

Making Connections

Despite what could be seen as a rocky start and numerous barriers to overcome, the Alternative Livestock program has been receiving nationwide recognition. The Kellogg Foundation's faith and grant funding has given CIT recognition and has opened many doors. According to Leon Porter, "We've got cooperative agreements with New Mexico State, we've got cooperative agreements with Utah State, we've got it with the University of Arizona, we've got an agreement with Northern Arizona University, we've got Iowa State [and], Texas A&M" (personal interview, February 2002). In addition, CIT's Veterinary Medicine Department faculty, staff, and administrators attest to the spectrum of opportunities the Alternative Livestock program has initiated. Such opportunities include institutional partnerships, social and economic development, community building, and leadership initiatives to enhance present achievements.

The success and uniqueness of the Alternative Livestock program have given CIT credibility among veterinary schools. In the past, CIT had few options for the direction of the college; however, it is now in a position to choose among many paths. "One of the

national committees on extension diversity wanted to come to a tribal college and see what tribal colleges were about and what we had to deal with. They were impressed with the quality and rigor of our programs,” reported Porter. “This type of recognition has opened up doors to a lot of different avenues that we had never envisioned for the students when we put this Kellogg project in place” (personal interview, February 2002).

Leon Porter also related,

There is a worldwide interest in this program because of the kind of hands-on training possibilities the program provides in the veterinary clinic and in handling the animals in the ranch, the nutrition, veterinary medicine aspects that cannot be found in the approximately 26 veterinary schools around the nation. (personal interview, February 2002)

A number of veterinarians want to spend time working with CIT students and faculty, and as those people come on board, more doors of opportunity are open. Porter stated the following about newly established partnerships:

As CIT started to develop this project, more and more people became aware of CIT and the things that we were doing which opened up different doors to a number of different partnerships and collaborative agreements between CIT and other institutions. . . . In addition, Plum Island, the premier disease research center in the country, is recruiting CIT students for summer internships. (personal interview, February 2002)

Impacting the Community

To enhance community awareness, CIT facilitates a number of services to the community through K-12 school links, workshops on herd management, herd improvement through artificial insemination, small animal care, and llama introduction.

The elk ranch has brought students of different ages together, thereby raising animal awareness and enhancing community bonds. Elementary students from the reservation and surrounding school areas come to visit the elk ranch in October for a day of food, a pumpkin hunt, and hay rides. Students in the Alternative Livestock program are in charge of planning the activities and providing educational information about elk. In addition, area high school students are learning about insemination programs through partnerships with CIT.

Unexpectedly, programs like the Alternative Livestock program have taken CIT's awareness of students and the community to another level. Ongoing programs are now linked with the college's efforts in community development. Cosy Balok, of the McKinley County Humane Society, New Mexico, is currently partnering with CIT to inform and bring together the community-at-large. The McKinley County Humane Society takes K-12 students, small animals like llama, and domestic pets like cats and dogs to elder shelter homes. "The idea of elders holding a little lamb to their heart, for example, talk of a lot of stories that bring the emotional feelings that the old people have," said DeGroat (personal interview, February 2002). The animals serve as a bridge to bring the older and younger generations together to learn and share with each other.

The cultural and curricular challenges of the CIT Veterinary program, as with all tribal college programs, lie in the need to help students deepen their understanding of self and cultural identity. There is a concern that many Native students are not completely comfortable with their identity. "They're kind of caught in no-man's land," according to DeGroat. "They don't speak Navajo, and they don't speak English. Their knowledge is divided between old and new traditions" (personal interview, February

2002). Integrating Western education with Navajo values is an ongoing struggle for CIT. One example of how CIT and the Alternative Livestock program are integrating both cultures is learning by experiencing. As President Tutt explained,

We're capable, we can have our own way of teaching, and I think a lot of our teaching basically is that we believe a lot in using our own hands. We want to work with students, and that's how they work best, by getting it with their hands and being in it, and being apart of it, rather than having to see some abstract reading and trying to understand it. (personal interview, February 2002)

Current State of Affairs

Since the beginning of the Alternative Livestock program, there have been some setbacks in the market value of elk. One was the decline of the Asian market, a major player in the medicinal use of elk velvet. The price per pound of elk velvet dropped from \$120 to \$140 per pound to \$15 to \$20 per pound. Second, chronic waste disease has had a major impact on the elk industry. Elk with this disease cannot convert food, and as a result their immune systems deteriorate. This disease was linked to mad cow disease, which caused the price of elk to drop from \$5,000 to \$1,000. Originally, there was going to be a stand-alone specialization in elk management, but because of the current low market value for elk, the program is now a part of the Veterinary Technology program. If the demand for elk should increase, CIT has the infrastructure to create a full-fledged elk specialization and management program.

Ideally, CIT would like to produce enough elk product to sustain and expand the program. At first, CIT could not afford the very best elk, but through artificial insemination better elk are being bred. It is important to note that it takes three years to

make one genetic change in an animal. Therefore, CIT is keeping the younger elk and selling off the inferior ones. The current goal for CIT is to have 25 bulls producing 40 pounds of high-quality antlers. In total, CIT currently has 30 to 32 elk, which is three times the number with which they started. This year, 2002, marks the first time CIT will sell their antler harvest with a return on their investment. Regardless of current profits, CIT still needs to keep an eye on where they will be 10 years from now, strategic planning on how many elk they sell, and how they market their harvests. This is essential to the fiscal sustainability of the program.

Although CIT is concerned with taking the Alternative Livestock program to higher levels economically, the struggle continues to take CIT students to the spiritual level. Janis Perry, an elder, made this point:

Our knowledge is very limited. Insofar as speaking in terms of spiritualism, and therefore, I think that it's up to the Navajo wise men, wise persons, that they in turn become involved in teaching our youth at the next level, or the spiritual level, because they possess knowledge like the computer here. They have connections in so many different ways and if they can bring those onto our campus, they can provide that additional knowledge of what we can do with this project. (personal interview, February 2002)

Aware of such responsibility, CIT leaders are encouraging students to become more involved in the reservation's socioeconomic development by teaching them to appreciate the reservation land and to understand Navajo cultural and historical connections with the elk while becoming familiar with advanced veterinary technologies. Perry's candid words in reference to the wise men's responsibility reverberate in the commitment of CIT leaders who are diffusing the veterinary technology learned at CIT

through online courses, videos, and radio broadcasting of veterinary techniques in both languages, Navajo and English.

Conclusion

A 92-year-old Navajo was up in the mountains visiting CIT's elk ranch and he just stood by the fence forever watching those animals. I finally walked up to him and asked him, "Well, what do you think?" He said, "This is a sacred place. It's a sacred place because I can breathe the same air that these animals are breathing. I have never been able to do that in my life." It was a splendid moment, because I was hearing this old, old wise man explain what an impact the elk had on him. He visits often and sits among the elk for hours. (Dr. Clint Balok, personal interview, February 2002)

Jerome Bruner (1996) questioned whether "schooling can be construed both as the instrument of individual realization and at the same time as a reproductive technique for maintaining or furthering culture" (p. 67). Even though Bruner's response at the time was "not quite yes," CIT is an example of the possibility. CIT is an exemplary institution that meets the needs of Native peoples and the Navajo Nation. The Alternative Livestock program is bringing knowledge to younger Navajo generations while they are exercising and developing a strong cultural heritage, one that will develop their professional, cultural, and ethnical identities. According to Janis, as a cultural advisor, this is made possible through the connections and technology that CIT "wise men" bring (personal interview, February 2002).

Through the Alternative Livestock program, CIT's leaders have developed a scholarship of engagement that ties the institution to its students, families, and the community—for example, the unique hands-on opportunity, the "knowing by doing" act we unconsciously develop in being a member of a culture. This is what Sylvia Scribner

once described to Brunner (1996) when she said, “We know how to do things long before we can explain conceptually what we are doing or normatively why we should be doing them” (p. 151). Students at CIT skip the internship phase and become experienced veterinary technicians after walking out the college doors; they become experts in park management and elk industry as soon as they complete the program. Another example of this important engagement is that the CIT program is bringing students back to the family by extending their study to prepare them to manage their own farm animals. Families are impressed to see their sons and daughters well informed about microbiological worlds that were unheard of in past generations. Dr. Balok said that students sometime encounter resistance in “believing in what cannot be seen,” but they are prompted and stimulated to blend Western and local knowledge. Most important, because the veterinary classes at CIT are connected to the actual work of the animal clinic, students are exposed daily to community emergencies and problems. Being aware of the community’s problems, students reflect on solutions to these problems and graduate with a commitment to community service.

Ultimately, the elk provide a new learning resource for students and present a new alternative to the community. While visiting the elk ranch with Dr. Balok, one learns about how the elk take care of their own as brave survivors, looking out for each other. Dr. Balok observed that the elk do not run for the trees during thunderstorms, like most farm animals do. Rather they lie, serene, in the open fields. Is it possible that the elk might show students at CIT innovative ways to see things around themselves? The rescued connection with the elk may provide a chance to look back into the past and learn more about the Navajo ways of revitalizing students’ knowledge, enhancing the

lives of their families, and providing support to the community-at-large in a culturally respectful and appropriate way, developing faith, support, and commitment to the Navajo and other Native American nations. As President Tutt said,

We all have to pull together in order to get there. It's not an 'I' situation. We are all in it or none at all. (personal interview, February 2002)

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