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The Early Years of Diné College

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In late summer of 1969 the phone rang. Classes were about to begin at Navajo Community College and the person hired to teach history had backed out at the midnight hour. The new college needed someone, really almost anyone, young and foolish enough to accept this last minute invitation. I hardly hesitated. "Sure," I said. "I'll come to Many Farms." ¹.

The decision to jettison graduate school and join the NCC faculty actually was less impulsive than it might initially appear. My grandparents had lived in the Navajo Nation during the 1930s and early 1940s. My grandfather, a school principal, thus had resided in Navajo country in the livestock reduction era and he had stories to tell. He would peel an apple with an old pocket knife that I now treasure and begin to remember the days of Chee Dodge and Jacob Morgan. I imagined him driving his Oldsmobile that he had purchased from Rico Motors in Gallup. And now luck and fate had intervened to permit me to live in the Navajo Nation during another tumultuous time.

The trip from Madison to Many Farms had its portentous moments. I had

rented the smallest and oldest U-Haul truck in America. The gas gauge didn't work and the vehicle gave every promise of living up to the "Adventures in Moving" slogan. I ran out of gas in Iowa. Halfway across the endless state of Nebraska, I thought of some of my more creative friends who, knowing my interests, were quite capable of calling me up and impersonating a Navajo college administrator. Just west of Grand Island, I imagined arriving in Many Farms and someone--quite politely, of course--asking, "Who are you?"

Two days later, as I cautiously ventured into the NCC administrative office, someone asked--quite politely, of course: "Who are you?" As I gulped, she queried, "Are you here for an interview?" "No," I replied, attempting to sound relatively assured. "I'm here to teach history."

From 1969 to 1972 I had the great good fortune to teach at the first tribal college. Although I now live elsewhere, my work has often focused on Navajo history and I often have the pleasure and privilege of returning to the Navajo Nation. And I remain linked to Navajo country in another important way, for my daughter was born in Sage Memorial Hospital in Ganado on one fine early spring morning, as horses grazed nearby.

Navajo Community College is now Diné College and Diné College has moved on from Many Farms. Its days of sharing facilities with a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding high school constitute an increasingly distant memory. Almost no one at the College today was a part of the initial community in Many Farms. But the initial hopes and dreams of the College remain important and the institution's first years are instructive. This time tells us something about the enormous

achievements in Indian education during the past thirty years and also something about the distance that remains to be traveled.

What was it like to be a student or a faculty member or an administrator at Navajo Community College during its first years? I can only fully speak to one dimension of this question, yet NCC was a small place and Many Farms was a good deal more intimate an environment than the Phoenix area where I now reside. I gained a pretty clear sense of student and administrative life. Moreover, as one might suspect a historian might do, I saved every scrap of paper generated in my sojourn: memos, newsletters, alternative newspapers, and all the rest. Such documents help inform these pages.

When you ask a student about college life, he or she is unlikely to begin by discussing the library or even the caliber of the faculty. Rather it's much more likely the discussion will start with some reference to what might be termed the non-academic environment. At NCC the talk always seemed to begin and end with housing and food.

Unless they commuted from the Many Farms/Chinle area, most NCC students lived in Dormitory Nine. Two married students lived in trailers and several others lived with friends or relatives in the BIA compound. Those sentenced to occupy Dormitory Nine lived three to a room. There were twin sets of bunk beds, no rugs on the floor, and no carpeting in the hallways. Windows were few and far between and they couldn't be opened, even when temperatures became stifling. Some genius back in Washington, D.C. had determined that the altitude of Many Farms made air conditioning unnecessary. The overhead

lighting was glaring and harsh. Walls easily permitted all the sounds of college life to pass from one room to another. It didn't do much for study, sleep, or individual privacy. As Navajo Community College occupied borrowed space, it could do little about this environment.

If one wondered about the housing, one had no doubts about the food. The high school cafeteria provided the cook, the food to be prepared, and the high school students to lengthen the lines and to occupy many of the tables. The cook apparently had grown up in the kind of Norwegian-American kitchen my father had known, where the counsel of "when in doubt, boil it" ruled. This BIA chef obviously regarded pepper as a dangerous spice and his culinary offerings lacked variety, and for that matter, taste. Student newspapers and publications often mused about this subject. One student expressed his annoyance quite succinctly: "My socks have absorbed so much starch they walk by themselves!"

In the fall of 1970 a trailer equipped with a grill arrived. The arrival of this "student union," as it was called, helped a little. However, the cafeteria offered cheap food and most students continued to eat there. It represented a symbol of a larger, prevailing student concern about whether they were attending a "real" college. They participated in sports in a high school gym, watched movies in a high school auditorium, studied in a high school library, and went to class in high school classrooms. The gym and the auditorium and the library were really adequate in size and scope; the classrooms were somewhat less satisfactory. Regardless of how one judged them, they all inescapably reflected reality: they were part of a BIA high school.

Athletics could have done a lot for morale, but teams fielded at NCC enjoyed quite mixed success. The rodeo team prospered, but the men's basketball team struggled. Community college basketball in Arizona is extremely competitive, with excellent local players joined by more than a few players making the unlikely move from Detroit or Chicago to an Arizona school in order to hone their skills and attempt to gain entry to a university to which they had initially been denied admission. Navajo men lacked not skill but height. In response to being out-rebounded by overwhelming margins, NCC began to bring in non-Navajo players, primarily African-Americans. The team did better, but the newcomers were perceived as outsiders, and fan support dwindled. In time the experiment ended with the cancellation of the program. Rodeo and, later, archery did work; intramural sports also engaged the interest of some students and faculty, as we competed against each other and occasionally participated in tournaments graced by names such as the Sheep Herders' Classic.

The library quickly developed good holdings in Navajo and Indian studies. Bernie Richardson, the first librarian, worked long and hard at his assignment and Bob Roessel, the College's first president, was determined that NCC acquire a first class collection. Aided by a Donner Foundation grant, they achieved their goal. Most students, however, were not accustomed to using a library. In common with their peers elsewhere, they were more prepared to copy than to do independent work. They spent limited time in Bernie Richardson's domain. Peer pressure encouraged them not to appear overly studious.

If they did not frequent the library, NCC students had few alternatives in the

evening hours and on those endless weekends. Some students had family responsibilities that took them away from Many Farms, but for those who stayed the isolation of Many Farms sometimes took its toll. The radio didn't help much. The fifty thousand watt radio station of the Navajo Nation, KTNN, had yet to be established. The area Bible radio station, however, did come in with impressive clarity, but little else could be heard during the day. Cable television could not even be imagined. The television translator frequently collapsed, often denying us the presence of a promising young Albuquerque broadcaster named Dick Knipfing and the inimitable weatherman Howard Morgan. During one of these intervals, I drove the ninety miles to Window Rock in order to watch Stanford make one of its rare Rose Bowl appearances.

Geographic isolation did not mean a lack of connection to larger social and political concerns. Debates flared up about the war in Vietnam, the Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island, and contemporary student activism. Diné students took pride in the role of the Navajo Codetalkers in World War II, for example, but the current war generated a variety of responses. On the day of the tragic deaths on the Kent State University campus, some NCC students rushed to the flagpole in front of the school and began to pull the flag down to half mast. Then other students, aided by a few BIA teachers, raised the flag. The two sides yelled at each other. The flag went down and up all day long.

In this setting there developed, inevitably, ferocious debates about social rules and regulations. Students and faculty alike expressed the wish to be closer to a town. Again, this was long before Bashas' Supermarket came to Chinle. In

Window Rock, FedMart furnished a no frills option to the limited fare available at the Many Farms Trading Post. For real excitement one could drive to bordertown communities. After a month or two in Many Farms, I noticed that Farmington increasingly looked like New York City.

In fact few Anglo faculty members complained past a certain point about isolation. Many of us were young and most of us loved living in Navajo country. Unless you had an accident, you didn't worry much about the availability of health care. Unless you had children, you did not worry about the proximity of schools. Salaries were then not much of an issue, either, for Anglo faculty. I went from graduate school, where I had known something other than independent wealth, to earning about eight thousand dollars for a ten month contract. Housing was extremely inexpensive and Many Farms furnished few temptations for profligate spending. For the first and last time in my life I saved money. Navajo faculty, staff, and administrators, it should be noted, often faced a different situation. They could be called upon to share their housing and portions of their salaries. On the other hand, NCC allowed them to make a home in their own country and to work for an institution whose ideals they embraced.

Anglo faculty members confronted at least two major dilemmas: the kind of teaching they would do and their role and place at a Diné institution. NCC was determined to be a Navajo school. It did not want to merely rip pages out of the Northern Arizona University or Arizona State University or University of Arizona catalogues and attempt to duplicate the courses listed there. Navajo Studies were supposed to be the heart of the college and with rare exceptions only

Navajos taught those courses. Students enrolled in courses encompassing Navajo arts and crafts, Navajo history and culture, Navajo language, and Navajo creative writing.

Some of the best teachers at the college graced Navajo Studies. One of my grandfather's students at Fort Wingate, the master silversmith Kenneth Begay, patiently introduced people to his art. The noted weaver Mabel Burnside Myers echoed Begay in quietly reminding her students to observe how she did her work. The distinguished linguist William Morgan, another Wingate graduate, smiled at our awkward attempts to gain minimal proficiency in the Navajo language. Ruth Roessel and Bob Roessel generously offered their thorough understanding of Navajo history and culture. Such classes attracted students of varying backgrounds and ages. They underscored the unique character of the College.

At first NCC also generated an impressive variety of Indian studies courses, covering subjects such as contemporary Indian affairs, Indians of the Americas, Indian economic development, Indian law and government, Indian art, Indians of the United States, southwestern Indian communities, Plains Indians, urban Indians, and Indian-white relations. Nationally prominent individuals came and served as guest speakers. I remember all too well rushing in five minutes late for a talk by Vine Deloria, Jr., only to have him pause, look sadly and disapprovingly in my direction and observe, "You white people are never on time." Eventually most of these classes were not continued, but they certainly offered a valuable complement to the curriculum in these first years.

If Anglo faculty in the liberal arts were rarely going to teach Navajo or Indian studies and if they were not going to only provide replicas of standard college and university courses, what were they to do? The dean of instruction, a New Yorker named Mordecai Abromowitz, brought as part of his cultural baggage the concept of inquiry circles. This open-ended, independent process left the more conservative in our midst rather befuddled. It allowed students, individually or in small groups, to frame questions that mattered to them and then to find ways to try to answer them. To borrow the apt phrase of current University of Arizona president Peter Likins, faculty members in this arrangement were supposed to be guides on the side rather than sages on the stage. Inquiry circle often meant independent study, for some students had unique questions. They could privately explore concerns they might never have admitted an interest in within a more traditional academic format.

For inquiry to be effective, a faculty member had to buy into this style of learning. If you did, lo and behold, inquiry seemed to be productive. If you didn't, then rather unsurprisingly, inquiry somehow failed to achieve many positive results. I agreed with a Navajo instructor who concluded that this process allowed students to think about new solutions, since, she contended, ready-made solutions from Navajo ancestors or Anglo culture did not always work.

Inquiry surely stretched me and my students. It forced me to read and learn and think about all sorts of things I would have ignored. More importantly, it encouraged students, often for the first time, to begin to define what mattered to them. They were a bit amazed that we allowed them to take charge of the focus

and direction of this portion of their education. They kept worrying about whether these credits would transfer. They often thought it was too much fun to be a part of a legitimate college curriculum.

During one semester Navajo students worked through inquiry with me to explore these subjects: the origins and growth of the Navajo reservation, Navajo self-determination, Navajos and Blacks, Navajos and sports, Navajo drinking patterns, Navajo dress through time, sports and society through literature, the Black college athlete, Black power, theory and psychology in coaching, Zuni self-determination, Indian literature, Indian education, Renaissance painting, and American drama. It goes without saying that I was not well prepared in all of these areas. However, along the way I learned a lot and I would like to think most of the students did, too.

Even given its strength, the inquiry approach seemed endangered right from the start, because some college officials shared student worries about whether such legendary registrars as Arizona State University's Alfred Thomas would deign to accept these credits. For the same reason, our initial pass-fail grading system came under fire. By the time I departed, a grade of "High Pass" had been added to the repertoire. I knew then that NCC was heading toward conformity in terms of much of its curriculum as well as its grading system. Inquiry circles vanished at about the same time grade point averages were created. It wasn't necessarily a bad move and it certainly was understandable. Maybe it just meant that NCC was ahead of its time. Maybe it simply meant that the much maligned 1960s were finally coming to an end.

Anglo faculty members glibly subscribed to the ideal of Navajo control, but privately and occasionally more openly they conceded that in reality they had a lot of trouble with this concept. Teachers, after all, almost always think they know what's best for any institution and they are quick to blame its shortcomings on any one but themselves. At any college or university they are likely to portray students as unprepared and insufficiently dedicated and they are even more likely to characterize administrators as overpaid bureaucratically inept failed scholars. Such criticisms are almost an obligatory dimension of faculty culture, but at NCC criticism of students or administrators did not seem appropriate.

Anglo faculty thus puzzled over what to do and in time, some Navajo faculty in the liberal arts also wondered about how to voice disagreement. On a few memorable occasions, faculty members made their unhappiness quite public; in 1973 the Los Angeles Times printed a long story highlighting current grievances. These complaints were ill-founded, but they did begin to speak to an interesting problem about the place of criticism in such an institution.

Administrators at the college had particularly demanding assignments. They had to help initiate programs, make do with a temporary campus, and listen to competing voices. Non-Navajo administrators faced particularly challenging roles in their exercise of authority. The president was the college to the world outside and he, more than anyone, knew the fragility of the enterprise and the need to maintain a confident, unruffled face to the public, regardless of the institution's internal circumstances. This task was made all the more intriguing by a particular kind of board of regents.

The Board of Regents represented a unique dimension of the College. In the preface to the 1971-1972 NCC catalogue, President Ned Hatathli declared:

The Navajo Community College is fundamentally Indian. Its view of education is derived from the realities of Indian life. Its courses of instruction open the world of ideas to Indians. Most important, the policy direction and guidance for the College is Navajo Indian because the members of the Board of Regents are selected by the Navajo Tribal Government and people. It is in their behalf that I bring you the hopes of our College's faculty, staff, and students that we can join forces for economic and social betterment of all Indian people through education of our own choosing.

The Board of Regents therefore symbolized Navajo control and direction. Technically speaking, boards of trustees are in charge of all colleges and universities. They are legally responsible for the school they represent and they usually have something to do with raising money and supporting and defending the school's good name. On nearly all campuses they are a distant force and presence. The president reports to the Board, the Board nods and says fine, keep doing what you're doing. There may be a brief and animated discussion about the status of athletics or the lack of parking places, but for the most part the administration is truly in charge.

At NCC, right from the start, a different kind of pattern emerged. The Board of Regents' job was to become more actively involved and engaged. Meeting once a month, they heard details as well as the usual generalizations and assurances. They took personal responsibility for what was going on, for it was their school. At a Board of Regents meeting held November 4, 1968, at the

Tsaile-Wheatfields chapter house, Howard Gorman noted:

We are all very proud about the College. Our plans are big...in the past many Navajo parents sent their children to college away from the reservation; often they failed and came home. Now we have a college on the reservation so our students can go to college here at home. We have our own language and culture in the curriculum. We will be able to provide another chance to those who have failed. We will be able to provide a first chance for the many that never before had a chance. The college is guided and controlled by an eight member board of regents. We provide the direction. It is our college.

Now, thirty years later, some critics argue that Diné College still struggles with some of the same problems delineated in this essay. It is a different time involving different places and it is difficult to discern what parallels may indeed exist. There can be no doubt that contemporary enrollment statistics reveal a certain irony. When NCC was founded only a handful of Navajo students attended ASU and other southwestern universities. Today approximately seven hundred Diné students are enrolled at Arizona State University (ASU). Thirty years ago no person served as a special advisor on Native issues and concerns to the ASU president. Today former Navajo Nation president Peterson Zah serves in that capacity. In 1969 nothing like the Labriola National American Indian Data Center or the American Indian Institute existed at ASU. Arizona State University thus has become a better option than it used to be for Navajo students; many students who at one time would have attended Diné College now attend Arizona State University. Reduced enrollment at Diné College, in turn, means reduced funding and the continuation of some old, troubling questions about institutional viability.

At the same time that one observes shortcomings, real or imagined, at Diné College, one should recall that all institutions of higher learning have their weaknesses. It would be unfortunate to let scrutiny of liabilities obscure the significant accomplishments Diné College and other tribal colleges can claim, despite limitations caused by lack of funding. In the final analysis there should be no doubt about the significance of Diné College. It has always been an important symbol of Native self-determination. It helped inspire and furnish the model for more than two dozen other American Indian colleges. But its importance is more than symbolic. As Mr. Gorman foresaw, it has offered another chance or a chance that otherwise would not be there at all. It has changed lives. It has made new futures possible.

As we begin a new century, I believe the best years of Diné College are still ahead. If this is true, it will be because of the countless men and women who have worked hard to make a particular dream a reality. It will be because the Navajo Nation is not only the most sizable Indian nation in the United States but also among the most creative and imaginative of those communities.

A generation ago a young Navajo student wrote a poem about her own life and its opportunities and obligations. Permit me to borrow her words and apply them to the past, the present, and the future of Diné College:

I must be like a bridge for my people

I may connect time; yesterday today and tomorrow--

for my people who are in transition, also.

I must be enough in tomorrow, to give warning--if I should.

I must be enough in yesterday, to hold a cherished secret.

Does it seem like we are walking as one? ².

References

¹: I would like to express my deep appreciation to my many teachers in the Navajo Nation. I am grateful for all they have taught me through the years. I appreciate their knowledge, their patience, and their generosity. This article began as a presentation to Navajo Community College students, faculty, and administrators in Tuba City, Arizona. I would like to thank those in attendance that evening for their enthusiastic interest in this subject. I have also written about my experiences at Navajo Community College and my interest in Navajo history in an essay, "I May Connect Time," included in Calvin Martin, editor, The American Indian and the Problem of History (Oxford University Press, 1987), 136-143. The move to Many Farms is also described in the introduction to Iverson, Riders of the West: Portraits From Indian Rodeo (University of Washington Press, 1999).

²: The poem by Irene Nakai, "Bridge Perspective," is also quoted in "I May Connect Time;" it appeared initially in Larry Evers, editor, The South Corner of Time (University of Arizona Press, 1980), 91