

Digital Pathways
Best Practices in Distance Education for American Indians

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Executive Summary



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EDUCATION FOR AMERICAN INDIANS

Introduction & Conference Executive Summary

Introduction

Distinguished leaders and scholars from American Indian communities across New Mexico, the Southwest, and the United States met on March 18–19, 2004 in Las Cruces, New Mexico to attend *Digital Pathways: Best Practices in Distance Education for American Indians*. Stakeholders in American Indian distance education collaborated to gather best practices and to develop higher education opportunities at a distance for American Indian communities. The Digital Pathways conference highlighted distance education as one solution to postsecondary educational needs in American Indian communities. These communities are often rural and underdeveloped economically, making them excellent candidates for distance education programs. Another benefit that emerged at the conference was the ability of distance education programs to keep the best and brightest students at home during critical years of cultural and leadership development.

Hosted by NMSU's Office of Distance Education and American Indian Program in collaboration with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's *Anytime, Anyplace Learning* program, this event brought together over 100 participants from nearly 70 American Indian, government, and higher education organizations. Participants represented institutions of higher education, nonprofit associations that support distance education, tribal education and government organizations, New Mexico State Public Education Department, elected state officials, and current American Indian distance education students.

Digital Pathways was planned to address post-secondary distance education programs targeted at tribal employment needs — programs with great potential for solving economic and social challenges hindering development in pueblos and on reservations. New Mexico's tribal leaders support distance education as a resource to improve American Indian participation in higher education. Based on this support, *Digital Pathways* was conceived with two primary goals:

1. To create a solid understanding of best practices in distance education for American Indian students, and
2. To use these best practices to develop a plan to support successful delivery of distance education courses and programs to American Indian communities.

The conference also presented an invaluable opportunity for stakeholders to build relationships that will help to create a positive, proactive environment for educational innovation and implementation. The first day of *Digital Pathways* featured sessions on best practices in distance education for American Indians; the second day was dedicated to developing an action plan to create effective programs and support best practices in American Indian distance education.

Best practices were gathered in topic areas such as reducing technological barriers, program development, pedagogy, learning styles, effective use of technology, faculty preparation, integration of culturally relevant material, and student motivation.

Conference Goals & Outcomes

As the next stage in a collaborative process that will ultimately result in the development and implementation of successful, targeted distance education programs for American Indians in New Mexico and the Southwest, this conference was designed to build a strong community of support and engagement necessary to carry out these carefully-crafted programs. In addition to creating a coordinated and motivated community of stakeholders, the conference aimed to produce an action plan that includes the identification of:

- best practices to support American Indian students successful participation in distance learning (with applicable practices disseminated to all distance education students);
- current resources available to support distance education programs for American Indians and other geographically-isolated students;
- concrete options for delivery of distance education programs;
- sources of funding for program implementation;
- a representative advisory group to lead the project to the next stage;
- a network system composed of all stakeholders for the dissemination of information and action;
- a plan for distribution of conference proceedings and strategic planning/action reports;
- a timeline for the design, development, and implementation of distance education programs and further collaborations; and
- guidelines for assessing program effectiveness.

Next Steps: Strategic Goals for 2004-2005

After successfully meeting conference goals and outcomes through two days of best practices discussions and strategic planning, the path was laid for future action in the upcoming year in order to come closer to realizing improved educational opportunity in American Indian communities through distance education. Three areas of action were identified with specific goals detailed in each:

Planning

- Compile and distribute *Digital Pathways* conference proceedings
- Present results to individual tribes to facilitate buy-in
- Present results during government-to-government meetings
- Survey tribal needs/priorities in infrastructure and programming
- Identify existing and needed resources for tribes and universities
- Identify tribal and university costs
- Identify personnel needs
- Identify and secure funding sources
- Develop phased approach to distance learning
- Form articulation agreements
- Obtain long-term commitment from tribal communities and universities

Building Awareness and Support

- Identify spokespersons from existing distance education programs
- Conduct hands-on demonstrations for tribal leaders and communities

Coordinating Efforts

- Guide group to develop collaborative mechanisms
- Identify stakeholder representatives with leadership and decision authority
- Create communication methods (listservs, protocols, methods, et al.)
- Coordinate needs assessment efforts
- Facilitate a distance education meeting at American Indian Program Council: showcase distance education for leaders
- Align priorities between stakeholders

Committees were formed during the conference to carry out actions to fulfill the goals as outlined. Work is currently in progress in each of the committees.