

Digital Pathways
Best Practices in Distance Education for American Indians

March 18-19, 2004 • Las Cruces, New Mexico

Presented by:

New Mexico State University Office of Distance Education
Dr. Carmen Gonzales, Vice Provost for Distance Education

New Mexico State University American Indian Program
Dr. Donald Pepion, Director

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

Whole Group Panel Discussion

Higher Education Challenges Facing American Indians and the Distance Education Possibilities
(Issues, Concerns and Needs)



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BEST PRACTICES IN DISTANCE
EDUCATION FOR AMERICAN INDIANS

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Panel Summary

All Digital Pathways conference participants were gathered Thursday morning, March 18th, for the first panel of the event, entitled: *Higher Education Challenges Facing American Indians and the Distance Education Possibilities (Issues, Concerns & Needs)*. While the outcomes of this conference may apply to American Indian communities everywhere, New Mexico State University is focused on bringing distance education to communities within our state and region. Therefore, this first panel was purposefully composed of New Mexicans with in-depth knowledge of the educational needs of local communities, specifically those that are American Indian. This panel also served to present the major issues and challenges confronting American Indian higher education and how distance education may address those needs. The issues brought forth during this panel helped to set the stage for best practices panels scheduled for Thursday afternoon.



Dr. Joseph Suina

**Associate Professor, Language Literacy & Sociocultural Studies, University of New Mexico;
Former Governor, Cochiti Pueblo**

Dr. Joseph Suina is an associate professor at the University of New Mexico College of Education, and a former governor of Cochiti Pueblo. Currently, Dr. Suina serves as a Tribal Council member for Cochiti Pueblo, Cochiti Community Development Corporation, and the University of California - Pueblo Indian Education Committee. Dr. Suina is also a board member for the New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities and the New Mexico Holocaust and Intolerance Museum.

Presentation Summary

Dr. Suina opened the AM Panel with an overview of concerns that native communities have with technology, education, cultural preservation, and collaboration with external organizations. The following is a summary of his address. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

Individuals, institutions, and the larger society beyond American Indian communities must build trust and create progress together as equals. Listening is the greatest challenge for institutions that want to work with American Indians and more time is needed to do this effectively. However, the main issue at hand during the *Digital Pathways* conference is technology. For Indian people, as is the case for all people, technology has often had unforeseen and unwanted effects. In Indian communities, television has directly attributed to many societal ills including loss of culture, obesity, lack of involvement, disrespect toward others, and violence. More importantly, television serves as a deflection away from things traditionally held as sacred in Indian cultures. Additionally, television is a major contributor of derogatory images of Indians, further leading to their degradation within the larger society.

Yet, today's meeting illustrates a positive example of collaboration between equals to use technology for a productive and useful outcome, namely education. Throughout this process it will be critical to keep in mind what is most at stake: American Indian cultural identity preservation.

But what is Indian cultural identity? There is not one, but many. In New Mexico alone, there are 22 sovereign Indian nations composed of three major groups. First there are two Apache tribes, Mescalero and Jicarilla. Next, there are four distinct Navajo community areas (Alamo, Ramah, Four Corners Area,

and Tohatchi) that come together under one nation comprising the largest Indian group in the United States with over 300,000 members. Lastly, and unique to New Mexico, there are 19 Pueblo groups with five languages and 16 dialects. Within these nations exist great diversity, and institutions that collaborate with these nations need to recognize and appreciate this variety, as well as understand that it will take time to learn the implications of the similarities and differences in collaborative efforts.

Many major issues threaten the Indian way of life from basic needs such as health, education, roads, economic development, housing, and environment, but to these societies what is most important is cultural preservation. While continuing to lose lands and, more recently, water rights to the outside world, the last thing American Indians have, and must keep, is cultural identity. Therefore, cultural traditions must be embedded in the educational process throughout life.



Penny Bird

Assistant Secretary of Indian Education, New Mexico

Dr. Penny Bird is the New Mexico Public Education Department Assistant Secretary for Indian Education. Dr. Bird has worked with the Zuni Public Schools since 1993. Her first job was as a curriculum resource specialist for two years. After that, she was curriculum coordinator for four years. Since July 1999, Dr. Bird has served as director of Instruction for the district, working to help students reach their maximum potential and ensuring that instruction in the schools aligns with state standards and benchmarks. Dr. Bird holds a Bachelor's degree from the University of

Colorado at Boulder, a Master's degree from the University of New Mexico (UNM) and since 1999 has been a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) candidate at UNM.

Presentation Summary

Dr. Bird, as a state government liaison in the education sector to New Mexico Indian communities, emphasized the importance of getting involved with the Office of Indian Education as a measure to assure further developments in the improvement of education. The following is a summary of her address. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

More time needs to be given to the issues being addressed at the *Digital Pathways* conference. The issues are large and complex issues, and addressing them properly will take many more meetings. Time is not on the side of American Indians when dealing with the larger society and these time constraints also negatively dictate their ways of teaching and learning. Education in American Indian communities has traditionally been a timeless process, and the challenge to the American Indians and higher education institutions is to work with the children and bring their learning into a more meaningful realm.

Thanks to the leadership of the tribal and government leaders, American Indians may now address their own educational needs through the Indian Education Act (IEA). With an overall goal to increase access (see Figure 6) the IEA contains major provisions concerning American Indian governance, teacher quality, and parent/community involvement.

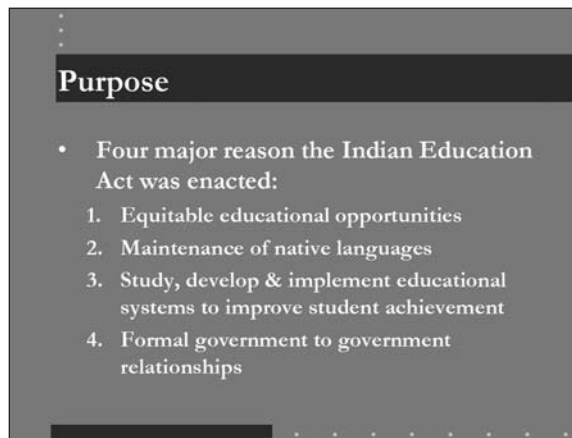


Figure 6.

Not only do issues of access exist, but also appropriate and relevant programming. How are we making education useful for today's American Indian students? In the past, students have always been told what is good for them. In reality, experts do not always know what is best for real people. This approach must be changed. All stakeholders need to be at the table together and involved in the dialogue. All stakeholders including tribal members, elders, leaders, educators, higher education, state and federal institutions must coordinate on equal footing.

Following is a list of the top goals of the New Mexico Indian Education Office under the direction of Penny Bird: increasing responsiveness to Indian communities through staff expansion, government-to-government meetings, office space and staff expansion, and funding. In the past, the Office of Indian Education has designated funds for a wide variety of projects including: recruitment to increase American Indian teachers and administrators; support services to teachers working with American Indian children; and research, development and implementation of exemplary programs serving American Indians. Two new requests for proposals are now being formulated for projects intended to address American Indian instructional materials and Native American language/culture certification. Currently, the Office of Indian Education provides language/culture certification through Memorandum of Agreements with the Jicarilla Apache Nation and Santa Clara Pueblo.

There is a real need to increase access to educational opportunity and effective, quality distance learning systems have the capability to solve access issues and bring education to those individuals in rural communities who can most benefit from these innovations.



Dr. Marilyn Johnson

Director, Partners for Success - Pueblo of Laguna Department of Education

Dr. Marilyn Johnson is the Director of the *Partners for Success* (PFS) program at the Pueblo of Laguna Department of Education. PFS was established to improve educational services to the community. PFS provides employment and training services, student support services, and the Laguna Acoma Vocational Rehabilitation Project.

Presentation Summary

The theme of accessibility was continued in Dr. Johnson's presentation, with a concentration this time on improving and maintaining accessibility to technology for a wide variety of specific needs populations, including individuals with

disabilities, those who live “off the grid” in areas with no or limited technological infrastructure, or those with low incomes. The following is a summary of her remarks. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

Society cannot afford to leave anyone behind and providing access to training and employment opportunities for those who are disabled, place bound, or with other needs reduces discrimination. This is not only wise social and economic policy, it’s also the law. Legislation entitled the *Rehabilitation Act of 1998, Section 508* compels us to address these needs (see Figure 7).

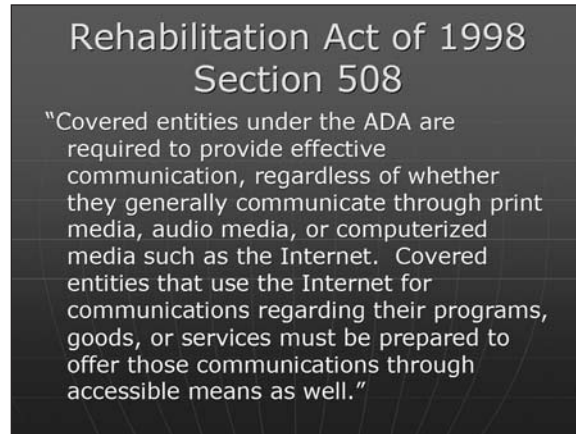


Figure 7.

There is a tremendous array of resources (see handout) available to support broadening accessibility for those who are disabled or have other needs. For example, assistive technologies exist for those with audio, visual, or tactile needs (for individuals with mobility impairments). Students with learning disabilities (limited attention span, reading difficulties, or organizational disabilities) also have assistive technology options available to them.

Accessibility difficulties are not confined to special needs populations, but also to individuals in rural areas, and especially those rural households that are designated low income. Nationally, those with an income above \$30,000 USD are more likely to have Internet access, and many rural areas have income averages below that, as is the case in New Mexico. Global accessibility begins with access to education and access to employment and failure to embark on change will result in marked disparity for access to information, resources, and learning opportunities and more. American Indians have a responsibility to increase access to education and this is crucial for the overall development of tribal communities (see Figure 8).

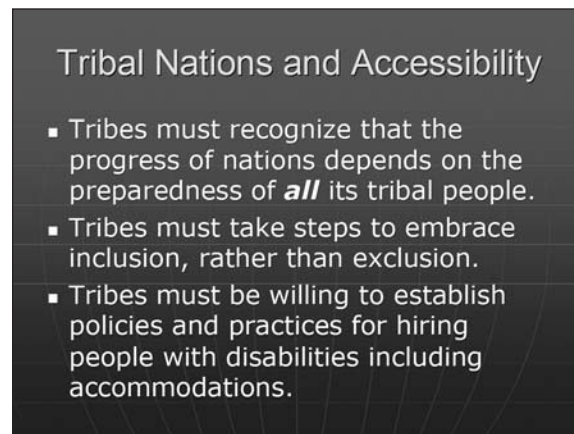


Figure 8.



Dr. Shelly Valdez

Founder, Native Pathways

Dr. Shelly Valdez is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna Tribe, located in the central part of New Mexico. Dr. Valdez’s educational background includes a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education, Master of Arts in Elementary Education, and Ph.D. in Multicultural Teacher Education focusing on research in the area of science education. She has worked in the education field for 18+ years in various capacities including: classroom teacher; Title VII Indian Education Coordinator; Educational Consultant with Sandia National Laboratories Educational Outreach Programs; Project Director for the *Four Directions Technology Project-An Indigenous Model*; and Associate Director for K-12 Programs at the American Indian Science & Engineering Society (AISES). Currently Dr. Valdez owns & manages an educational consulting business, *Native Pathways*, located in New Mexico.

Presentation Summary

Dr. Shelly Valdez reviewed a model for providing American Indian educational online resources. The title of this model is *Four Directions: An Indigenous Model*. The following is a summary of her presentation. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

The *Four Directions* project is “a culturally-based model of Indian education integrating technology across the curriculum.” *Four Directions’* numerous successes and challenges during its existence has important implications for future efforts in distance learning and American Indian students.

Founded in 1995, *Four Directions* was begun by the Laguna Pueblo Department of Education along with partners using a five-year, \$5.7 million U.S. Department of Education Innovation Challenge grant. Of all projects awarded Innovation Challenge grant funding that year, *Four Directions* was the only one that impacted Native American students. Now a consortium of 19 members (see Figure 9), *Four Directions* boasts a multitude of partners, including the Museum of the American Indian, Heard Museum, Office of Indian Education Programs, Haskell Indian Nations University, Laguna Department of Education, University of New Mexico, Sandia National Laboratories, University of Texas at Austin, Kansas University, Intel Corporation, Microsoft, and many other local and national members.

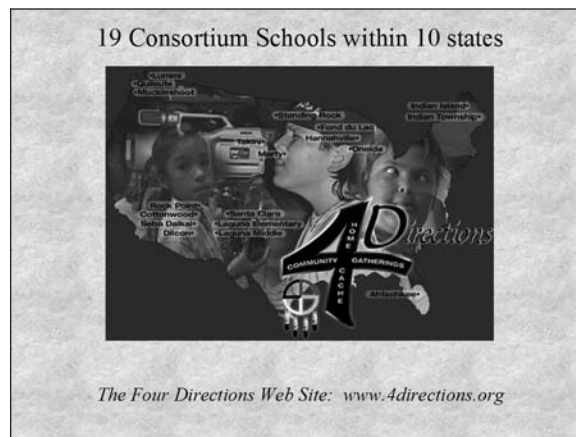


Figure 9.

Four Directions serves many purposes for both the American Indian educator and student. For educators, the project offers professional development opportunities such as large scale summer institutes, smaller scale regional institutes, online distance learning courses, administrator workshops, curriculum development, network infrastructure support, virtual museums, intranet/webpage construction, conference presentations and workshops. With better educated teachers, students become the direct beneficiaries of

many of these efforts. *Four Directions'* successes are many, including the establishment of permanent, active partnerships; ongoing professional development; development of culturally-relevant, community-based curriculum meeting national standards; continued tribal government support; and an effective support system. Support of stakeholders is considered vital to *Four Directions* and fostering a deep relationship and understanding of American Indian communities is top priority for all involved with the project.

Challenges encountered during the existence of *Four Directions* presented themselves in the form of administrative turnover, educator techno-phobia, inappropriate uses of technology by students (game playing, etc.), lack of student-directed active learning and thematic curriculum development, and evaluation and assessment difficulties.

Overall, however, *Four Directions* has resulted in many positive developments for American Indian education. Possible impacts include new partnerships with common goals; access to global resources and information for rural American Indian communities; creating a model of shared experiences; opportunity to create change; infrastructure capacity-building and reinforcement; and communication improvements between stakeholders and member communities.

One of the most important lessons learned from the *Four Directions* experience was a realization of the incredible importance of deep interaction in native communication with regards to technology integration. The richness of the human voice must always be valued above all. Technology changes the dynamics of the class, the pedagogy, the curriculum, and the modes of assessment. Patterns of interaction and relationship building must not be allowed to be diminished under technology's influence. Another useful outcome of *Four Directions* has been the increased exposure to technology for American Indian students, providing a window of opportunity to students for possible careers in computers or computer-related fields. *Four Directions* has also succeeded with its online mentoring efforts, providing much needed support to educators and students in technology integration. Finally, the culturally-responsive model has produced an abundance of curriculum materials suitable for online education of American Indian students.

Although Innovation Challenge grant funding has ended for the *Four Directions* project, it remains active as part of the Center for Educational Technology in Indian America (CETIA) headquartered at the Pueblo of Laguna and continues to work with Bureau of Indian Affairs schools.

Questions & Answers

All questions and answers have been summarized and edited for clarity and conciseness.

Question (directed to S. Valdez): *What sorts of classes are offered through Four Directions?*

Answer: Different components exist for offering services to K-12 schools and their educators. Specifically, a website and BBS bulletin board system are available for the 19 consortium member schools. Here courses are offered, as well as tech support and curriculum resources. (S. Valdez)

Question (directed to the entire panel): *With regard to the undergraduate and graduate students you are serving, have you conducted a survey of their interests?*

Answer: We have not formally surveyed students, but we are encouraging them to enter programs. Technical fields are popular. The challenge is getting students with disabilities to understand they have post secondary opportunities. A major effort is needed to concentrate on getting the information to the students, parents, and get the high school staff to support and encourage enrollment in higher education. (M. Johnson)

(With regards to *Four Directions*) The University of Texas has conducted formal assessments to inventory what professional development teachers want. (S. Valdez)

Question (directed to S. Valdez): *How did you handle digital phobia?*

Answer: Our *Four Directions* partners including the Universities of Texas, Oklahoma, Haskell and New Mexico have handled digital phobia very well by having onsite support people, through mentoring, and with tech support. (S. Valdez)

Question (directed to Dr. Suina): *Do you feel the infrastructure is there to have distance education and elearning opportunities in your community (Cochiti Pueblo)?*

Answer: Currently no, we need major infrastructure upgrades. (J. Suina)

Question: (directed to P. Bird): *What is the population focus of the Indian Education Act - high school or post secondary students? How does the Indian Education Act address college students?*

Answer: Accountability for Indian students achieving completion in college programs needs to be addressed. The Indian Council on Higher Education is grappling with the challenge. A lot more emphasis needs to be focused on retention and not just recruitment. University of New Mexico is looking at how to better mentor American Indian students through the college process. (P. Bird)