

Digital Pathways
Best Practices in Distance Education for American Indians

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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
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The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

Best Practices Panel

*Getting Started: Community Infrastructure Requirements, Funding Issues,
Programming for Local Needs, and Student Orientation and Support*



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Panel Summary

The purpose of this best practices panel was to introduce conference participants to the many finer points that should be taken into consideration when starting a distance learning program. Issues covered during the panel included infrastructure requirements, forming partnerships to make efficient use of existing resources, delivery modalities, pedagogy/learning, and support for both face-to-face and technology delivery. Each panelist was prepared to touch on these various topics from their own vantage point of expertise.



Dr. Lessley Price

Director, Distance Learning, Southwestern Oklahoma State University

Dr. Lessley Price is the director of Distance Learning at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford, Oklahoma. Since founding the Tele-learning Program at Southwestern, Dr. Price has watched delivery methods evolve from analog microwave technology to IP-based H.323 to web-based instruction. He assisted in the development of a prototype for interactive television over fiber, the format adopted by Oklahoma's ONENET state digital system. He was also instrumental in developing the first tribal college for the Comanche tribe of southwest Oklahoma.

Presentation Summary

Dr. Price opened this best practices panel with an overview of the evolution of distance learning at his institution, Southwestern Oklahoma State University, and how it has come to benefit local tribal communities. Ultimately, Dr. Price's presentation led into a discussion of the appropriateness of certain technologies for different groups of learners and how interaction, especially to American Indian students, is key in supporting retention and satisfaction. The following is a summary of Dr. Price's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SWOSU) has been utilizing distance learning methodology for many years. Distance education at SWOSU began with telecourses and remote, live, face-to-face instruction. Synchronous electronic distance learning first took place with basic audio and video communication systems and later using interactive television (ITV) and web-based learning. Throughout their experience, SWOSU has learned important lessons regarding the appropriateness of the various technologies for specific student age groups. With self-paced, totally asynchronous telecourses, SWOSU found that retention was high for all learners except the traditional college student group between the ages of 18 and 22. With remote, live, face-to-face instruction, retention was high for all groups, most likely because it was identical to the traditional classroom environment. When SWOSU began to utilize synchronous audio and video systems such as ITV, they discovered they could maintain an equally high retention rate. However, once web-based courses appeared, having only limited synchronous components, student perseverance began to drop, most significantly, again, in the traditional college age student group. These retention rates apply to both native American groups and non-native groups similarly.

It was determined from the statistics and the experiences that human interaction, particularly with younger students, was likely needed to maintain student retention. SWOSU believes that, in these younger students, the primary locus of control and motivation is not yet developed enough to allow for successful independent learning. To help solve this problem, SWOSU worked with a local

Comanche tribe to place mentors in the community. Mentors proved to be an invaluable resource in creating the human connection needed to sustain students. In fact, during one semester a community lost all their mentors and student retention fell to zero.

In conclusion, SWOSU believes in the power of distance learning as an effective means to providing educational opportunity. However, they follow the high-tech, high-touch approach in which all technology is mediated with the aid of interaction and communication.



Nadine Scala

Distance Education Program Specialist, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute

Nadine Scala serves as the Title III Director/Distance Education Specialist at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Ms. Scala has a B.S. in Biological Science from Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama; an M.S. in Curriculum Development from St. Johns University in New York City, New York; an M.S. in Administration from Manhattan College in Bronx, N.Y.; and an Ed.D (ABD) in Educational Leadership/Distance Education from University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. She has worked as a teacher, principal, and administrator in the New York Public School System; an Associate Provost at NMSU-Grants Campus; and a Media

Technology Department Distance Education Program Specialist at University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Presentation Summary

The Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI) is designated as a premier two-year community college by the North Central Association accrediting body. SIPI specializes in providing two-year Associate Degree Programs in Science and Technology to American Indians across the United States and Alaska. Ms. Scala, as SIPI's Distance Education Specialist, described how the organization functions and what it can offer Indian communities. The following is a summary of Ms. Scala's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

The Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI) is an NCA accredited, Bureau of Indian Affairs school with student representation from over 100 American Indian tribes.

During the last decade SIPI has moved towards offering distance learning as an efficient mode to deliver education to remote tribal communities. With almost \$4 million in funding from organizations including the United States Department of Education Title III program, Housing and Urban Development Agency, Lockheed Martin Aeronautics, and the American Indian College Fund, SIPI has been able to build technology infrastructure with satellite downlinks in several tribal communities and Internet development is underway. At the request of several tribes, SIPI chose to develop distance learning to a critical need area, Early Childhood Education, partnering with Head Start organizations in tribal communities. SIPI provides free tuition and materials, textbooks, student orientation, flexible course schedules and support services such as tutoring and financial aid. SIPI, serving solely an American Indian student market, offers culturally-relevant curriculum and support services.



Leah Hamann

Early Childhood Education Instructor, United Tribes Technical College

Leah Hamann, M.Ed., is an Early Childhood Education (ECE) faculty at United Tribes Technical College (UTTC) in Bismarck, North Dakota. Ms. Hamann has been involved with the distance education initiative at UTTC since its inception. She chairs the Accreditation and Standards Committee at the college. The ECE program is one of the first programs at the College approved by NCA to be offered totally online. Currently, Ms. Hamann coaches other instructors in best practices for online instruction.

Presentation Summary

Ms. Hamann provided panel attendees with an instructor viewpoint on getting started in distance education. Ms. Hamann told the story of beginning a distance learning program at her institution, United Tribes Technical College. She touched on the challenges of gaining acceptance of the distance learning paradigm from college administrators and faculty, of designing and developing distance education courses and programs, and of supporting instructors. The following is a summary of Ms. Hamann's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

United Tribes Technical College (UTTC), is set in an urban location and is managed by a partnership of five area tribes. Over 600 American Indian students from 65 tribes attended UTTC during the past academic year (2003-04).

Distance education is fairly new at UTTC and, in their case, required a hard-sell approach to gain acceptance by the college community, especially faculty. In the five years that UTTC has worked to develop their distance education program, they spent much of that time convincing their colleagues that distance education works. Faculty were concerned with the novelty of the anytime, anywhere philosophy of distance learning, with the commitment required for time-consuming activities associated with teaching online (100 to 160 hours for online courses versus 60 hours for a traditional face-to-face course), with acquiring the necessary technical skills, and with the quality of the educational experience. UTTC distance education staff were able to relieve these concerns and gain much-needed support by first, receiving accreditation for their distance learning degrees and second, by providing extensive professional development opportunities and support throughout the experience. Design and development of distance learning courses has become a fully-supported process and uses a uniform approach that results in consistency in design and delivery of distance learning across the board. In the end, UTTC distance education staff have been able to resolve the concerns for the majority of college faculty and their motto for service to UTTC faculty remains "Best Designed, Best Trained, and Best Supported".



Maureen Lesky

NMSU Distance Education Student

Maureen Lesky has been teaching at San Felipe Pueblo Bureau of Indian Affairs Elementary School in San Felipe Pueblo, New Mexico since 1996. Ms. Lesky teaches reading in the morning and is the technology coordinator for the school in the afternoon. Ms. Lesky has a Master's Degree in Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology from the University of New Mexico. Presently, Ms. Lesky is a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction program at New Mexico State University. She is a member of the Choctaw, Kiowa and Comanche tribes.

Presentation Summary

As our American Indian distance education student panelist, Ms. Lesky told of her own experience as a distance learner. Conference attendees learned why distance education was her first choice for higher education, what it is like to learn via distance, and how it's different from traditional learning. The following is a summary of Ms. Lesky's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

For many students, distance education is chosen out of necessity. Due to professional and family commitments in addition to other factors, as in the case of Ms. Lesky, learning via distance was the only possibility for furthering educational goals (see Figure 10).

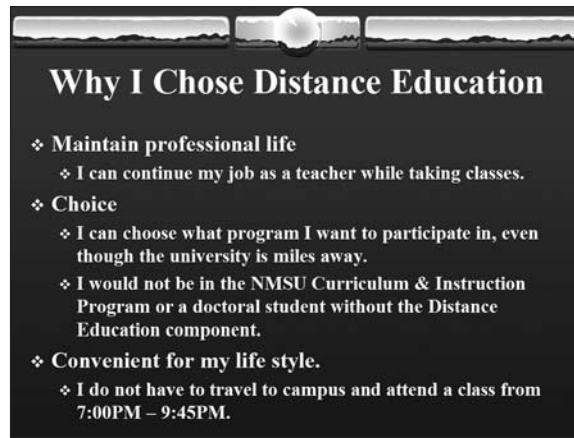


Figure 10.

For these students, including Ms. Lesky, distance learning is much different than traditional learning and requires a specific skills set in order to adapt to the new environment and succeed. Students must be self-disciplined, self-monitoring, and self-accountable. Students also require a robust technological infrastructure to be in place. They need support services to ease the transition including: clearly set and described expectations and instructions; community-building; orientation to the delivery platform (WebCT in the case of New Mexico State University); and technical skills.

Ms. Lesky believes that distance education is more productive than traditional learning because of its ability to accommodate a wide range of learning styles. Additionally, distance learning is naturally more engaging by requiring students to actively participate to fulfill course requirements. When coupled with choice in learning and a teamwork structure this leads to student ownership of learning and, therefore, a greater chance of success. (see Figure 11).

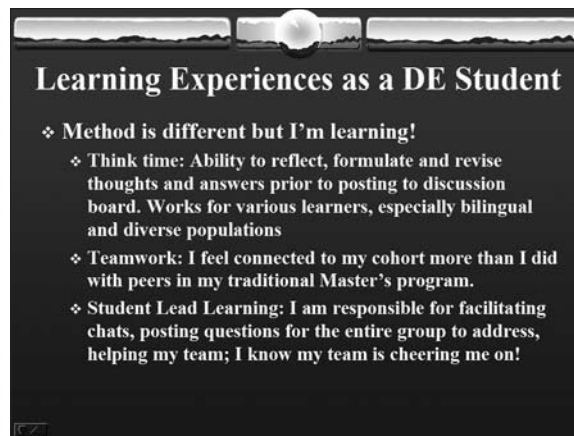


Figure 11.



Karen Dixon Blazer

Former Director, Division of Diné Education

Karen Dixon Blazer has over twenty-six years of combined executive leadership experience in academic and non-academic educational settings. Ms. Dixon Blazer has worked in private, public, and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools with a primary focus in Native American education. Her work has taken her to all four directions of the United States in working with nineteen Bureau-funded schools in ten states and sixteen tribes. Ms. Dixon Blazer has a Bachelor's degree in Physical

Education from Utah State University, a Master's degree in Educational Administration from New Mexico State University, and Ph.D. (in progress) in Curriculum & Instruction with an emphasis in Learning Technologies from New Mexico State University.

Presentation Summary

Karen Dixon Blazer, a Navajo tribal leader in the education field, concluded this best practices panel with a summary of the issues that should be considered when undertaking a new distance learning venture within a tribal community. The following is a summary of Ms. Dixon Blazer's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the address.

Tribal communities wishing to embark on the distance learning journey must first begin with an education vision statement that asserts that each individual will, through education, become self-sufficient in the world economy, even if that "world" encompasses only the local neighborhood. The Indian Self Determination Act of 1975 mandates that Native Americans create their own path to prosperity and fulfillment. Education is a primary means to achieving this goal.

While distance education offers excellent opportunities to bring this much needed education into rural communities, the current state of tribal preparedness to undertake and succeed in distance education, however, remains a significant obstacle (see Figure 12). The reality in many Indian communities is that many are living in poverty with average household earnings of only \$6,000 annually. With basic resources such as running water and electricity lacking, the development of distance education opportunities will remain a formidable challenge. Students must also be well-prepared for distance learning. They must become self-motivated learners, have technical training available, and be supported through human interaction and community-building.



Figure 12.

In order to have a real future in distance learning on American Indian reservations and pueblos, three things must take place: cooperation, infrastructure development, and planning for equity. Local schools, school boards, colleges, other tribal agencies, and most importantly, tribal leadership, must support the distance learning mission and cooperate to make it happen. They must also work with technology providers to build the local infrastructure. Lastly, the effort must strive for equity: access for all tribal members regardless of the degree of ruralness. To address this, in particular, a regional technical center should be planned for.

With collaboration, infrastructure development, and building equitable access, the foundation for successful distance education will be created.

Questions & Answers

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

Session 1

Question (directed to M. Lesky): *What was the difference between face-to-face and online learning and why was online better for you?*

Answer: Communication tools, teamwork, and teaching styles are more important than any delivery mode. The human connection developed through team-building in a face-to-face arrangement prior to going out online set the stage for successfully completing courses. (M. Lesky)

Question (directed to L. Hamann): *You stated that UTTC is discouraging on-campus students from going online. Could you expand on that?*

Answer: We want online learners, but we think young students just starting out should be in a face-to-face situation, not online. Advanced students are more self-directed and better prepared for online learning. (L. Hamann)

Question: *A major theme here is mentoring on the distance end. How do we facilitate that?*

Answer: One method is to put learning centers throughout the state including tribal communities. We are working on this, but its progress is based on funding. (Carmen Gonzales, Vice Provost for Distance Education, New Mexico State University)

SIPI has a reader/grader to help out the instructor, a sort of teacher assistant, and they act as a mentor to students. (N. Scala)

Question (directed to N. Scala): *What were the major requirements to become part of SIPI and the early childhood education program?*

Answer: Participating institutions were required to have a satellite downlink and to accept our courses. That was it. (N. Scala)

Session 2

Question (directed to N. Scala): *Does SIPI have any agreements with universities such as NMSU to accept their students upon completion?*

Answer: Yes, we do have Memos of Agreement with universities such as NMSU and New Mexico Highlands to accept our students into degree completion programs once they complete the two-year A.A. Early Childhood Education program. (N. Scala)

Session 3

Question: *Many panelists hinted to mentors as being a factor in student success. Can you tell me more about that?*

Answer: SIPI has a reader/grader to help out the instructor, a sort of teacher assistant, and they act as a mentor to students. These individuals must possess qualities such as good listening skills, patience, remaining positive, etc. in order to be effective mentors. (N. Scala)

Comanche sites used retired individuals as mentors. (L. Price)