

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

Dr. Donald Pepion, Director

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

Best Practices Panel

Partnerships & Collaborations



DIGITAL PATHWAYS
BEST PRACTICES IN DISTANCE
EDUCATION FOR AMERICAN INDIANS

Best Practices PM Panel *Partnerships and Collaborations*

Panel Summary

The main theme of the *Digital Pathways* conference was distance education as a solution to educational needs in American Indian communities, which are often rural and in some cases, underdeveloped economically. An additional sub-theme that was a thread throughout the conference is the need to build partnerships through collaboration in order to build capacity for more cost-effective and improved delivery of distance education into American Indian communities. This sub-theme was highlighted particularly during this best practices panel with examples of inter-/intra-institutional/organizational collaboration presented by the panelists.



Dr. Karen Mills

Senior Associate Dean of Instruction, Rio Salado College

Karen L. Mills, Ed.D., Senior Associate Dean of Instruction at Rio Salado College, provides the leadership and management for the college's day and evening credit academic courses and programs. Her regular responsibilities include managing the 330+ courses in Internet, print, and mixed media formats with an annual enrollment exceeding 40,000. She also operationalized the *26 Starts* that have become the hallmark of the Rio Salado Distance Learning Program.

Presentation Summary

Dr. Karen Mills of Rio Salado College [<http://www.rio.maricopa.edu>] in Arizona described her institution's unique approach to distance learning design and administration and the Sloan-funded Reachout Project, a Rio Salado effort directed towards partnering with three Arizona tribes. The following is a summary of Dr. Mills' presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the presentation.

In existence now for 25 years, Rio Salado College's systems approach to distance learning is key to succeeding in their mission to provide choice, access and flexibility; customized high quality learning design; personalized service; and organizational responsiveness. With no actual brick and mortar campus, the administrative building at Rio Salado houses the institution's 320 staff members who in turn support 27 full-time faculty and 775 adjunct faculty in the field. Together they provide distance education courses for over 53,000 students.

Rio Salado College is a pioneer in innovative learning on demand that characterizes the true, intended nature of most distance education programs. They are best known for their *26 Starts* policy in which all 1200 sections of Rio Salado's approximately 320 courses are offered every two weeks on a rolling basis. Plus, courses are never cancelled (see Figure 15).



Figure 15.

This convenient student-centered design is normalized across the institution giving the courses a uniform, yet customizable look and feel. Course design also features a consistent navigational template, an elearning instructional design and pedagogy philosophy, a dominantly asynchronous delivery format, and an acceleration option for energetic learners. Each course has a simplistic four part approach to curriculum and instruction: an introduction, a topic focus, assessment and adjustment, and a student content summary. An instructional support helpdesk is available for all non-content related questions. The average distance learning course retention rate is 80%.

Reachout Project: Lessons Learned

Rio Salado College, with funding from the Sloan Foundation, began the Reachout Project to bring educational opportunity to Indian reservations (see Figure 16). Three Arizona tribal reservations have participated in the program: Navajo, Gila, and Fort McDowell. Each site housed a technology lab staffed with an onsite support person.



Figure 16.

There are many lessons learned from this effort that can be applied to future projects to save time and resources and likely produce a higher rate of success:

- Rio Salado conducted a correlation study of the Reachout Project and found that demographic factors were not nearly as important as support. The study showed that the following three factors most impact student perseverance: interaction with other students in the learning lab environment, an onsite facilitator, and previous computer experience;
- The support of tribal leadership was very important in encouraging students to succeed in their educational pursuits;
- The project was resource intensive and it was found that people, money and time must be available and committed upfront to ensure program success;
- The onsite facilitator needed to not only be familiar with the local communities, but also have in-depth knowledge of the Reachout Project and Rio Salado College;
- Providing up-front services such as orientation, online registration, etc. helped greatly with student retention;
- Student financial buy-in was considered to be a critical factor. The project originally paid for

all student costs and the program suffered a high drop out rate. Once students became financially invested in the program, they seemed to be more motivated to complete their studies;

- It was discovered that students needed to develop self-sufficiency and independent learning capabilities to stimulate further buy-in. Front-end learning support services helped with this development;
- A cohort program design, in which students begin and end a program of study together, was preferable;
- Be flexible, creative, and student-centered in the approach to providing distance learning. Don't be afraid to try new things;
- Collaborate across institutional departments to improve distance education services; and
- Most importantly, nurture relationships with colleagues, staff, partners, and students.



Dr. Stella Perez

Project Director and Senior Consultant for Project SAIL, League for Innovation in the Community College

Dr. Stella Perez is the Director of the SAIL Project and Senior Consultant for the League for Innovation in Community College. Her work includes review and design of League web site content and contributions, as well as monthly updates and project developments. Dr. Perez earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Business and Public Administration from the University of Arizona; Masters of Education degree in Instructional Technology at Northern Arizona University; and Doctor of Philosophy in Community College Leadership with an emphasis on research in Educational Technologies from The University of Texas at Austin.

Presentation Summary

Dr. Perez presented the newly-founded SAIL Project (www.league.org/SAIL), an innovative effort by the League for Innovation in Community Colleges to provide specialty industry distance learning courses to two-year institutions of higher learning. The League is a 35-year old member association of over 700 community colleges nationwide, including 35 tribal colleges. The following is a summary of Dr. Perez's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the presentation.

In line with League's service to community colleges and the promotion of the open door (equal access) policy, the sole mission of the Specialty Asynchronous Industry Learning, or SAIL, Project is to fulfill vocational and professional workforce educational needs. SAIL meets this commitment by providing specialty industry content for online courses (no general education courses) and facilitating the exchange of these courses between participating institutions. (see Figure 17)

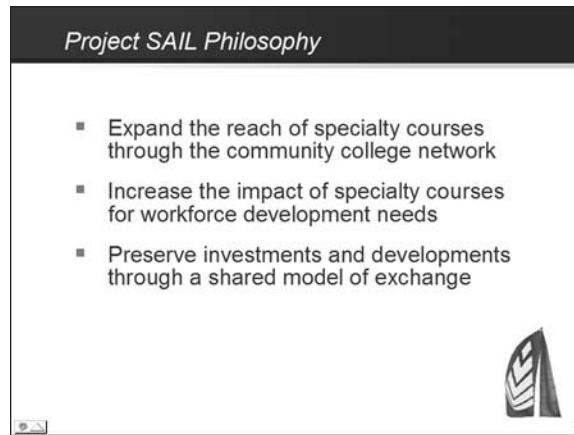


Figure 17.

Only six months old now, SAIL has 18 partners contributing content to over 100, primarily asynchronous, web-based courses with a diverse selection of curriculum from fire safety, to refrigeration, to manufacturing, and so on. Each contributing partner offers content with lease and exchange fees. Students participating in SAIL Project courses maintain enrollment at their home institution, benefiting from support services such as financial aid, computer labs, tutoring services, and workforce placement. By remaining with their original school, this keeps all costs associated with and generated by students at the home institution.

Content developers at each of the partner institutions recoup some of their costs from the fees described above. As it is well known in the distance education world, developing courses can be a very expensive and timely process. By sharing the work and the results, institutions can more cost-effectively compete. Solutions such as the SAIL Project are born out of the need for collaboration to contain online course development costs. Dr. Perez provided conference attendees with a handout, called *The Hidden Costs of Distance Learning*, dealing with this topic.

Dr. Perez finished her presentation by reminding the audience that the key to successful partnerships and collaboration is to create win-win situations: be sure to build something valuable into the deal for every partner involved.



Richard Subia

Executive Director, American Indian Institute for Progress, Southwestern Oklahoma State University

Richard Subia is the Executive Director of the American Indian Institute for Progress, a 501-C-3 non-profit foundation. Mr. Subia comes from a diversified background including military, manufacturing, and tribal government. He serves as a Board Member on the Caddo County Cattlemen’s Association and Oklahoma Primary Care Association. The American Indian Institute for Progress, Southwestern Oklahoma State University and the nine western Oklahoma tribal governments have formed the Western Oklahoma Native Nations Advisory Council (WONNAC). This organization is a collaborative effort to address issues and opportunities for tribal governments and their communities.

Presentation Summary

Mr. Subia focused on building productive collaborations between tribal governments and universities during his panel presentation. He uses the example of WONNAC, the Western Oklahoma Native Nations Advisory Council, and their successes and challenges in working together to bring distance learning to tribes in the state. The following is a

summary of Mr. Subia's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the presentation.

Native students in Oklahoma tend to have great difficulty maintaining enrollment in higher education programs and he attributes this to several factors including: academic deficiencies, personal financial mismanagement, and the inability to adapt to university environment. Therefore, in a state with 39 Indian tribes, the largest of which is the Cherokee with over 200,000 members, distance learning is viewed as an excellent resource by both state universities and tribal leadership for bringing educational opportunity into rural tribal communities where students may be nurtured and supported. Bringing this vision to fruition, however, has been a sizeable challenge. Paramount to this challenge has been the formation of productive negotiations between tribes and university administration. University leaders, first and foremost, do not clearly understand the scope of tribal government power and sovereignty, and often treat tribal officials unequally. There is a need for awareness building between tribal and university agencies.

To encourage distance learning buy-in from tribal leaders and to promote successful collaboration between universities and Indian governments, the Western Oklahoma Native Nations Advisory Council (WONNAC) was formed originally with nine member tribes and university representation. With an educational focus on addressing recruitment and retention issues for Native American students, the organization works to leverage resources, apply for grants, and bring distance learning into tribal communities. Of the 39 Indian reservations in Oklahoma, 23 now boast successful distance education programs.

WONNAC has been successful at increasing retention rates by not only developing locally-offered degree programs, but by providing student support in the form of orientations, mentoring, culturally-relevant curriculum, and a high-touch, high-tech approach that values the human connection in learning as much as the technological one. WONNAC has also helped to broaden Internet access by qualifying tribal communities for a more affordable T1 bandwidth e-rate discount. Plus, a variety of distance learning technologies are being harnessed, not just the World Wide Web. Interactive Television (ITV) has been used to address local health and agricultural needs such as in the case of a recent outbreak of livestock hoof and mouth disease. Mr. Subia concluded by stating that providing timely and responsive information through distance learning can benefit entire communities, and American Indian tribal leadership and universities have the responsibility to work together to make this happen.



Leah Woodke

Director of UTTC Online & Distance Education, United Tribes Technical College

Leah Woodke is the Director of Distance and Continuing Education at United Tribes Technical College (UTTC) in Bismarck, North Dakota. She is in the process of completing her doctoral studies in Instructional Design for Online Learning. Ms. Woodke has developed the model for online education services at UTTC. She is responsible for training faculty, web-based instructional design, and coordinating student services for distance learners. UTTC recently received accreditation approval to offer two degree programs online: Early Childhood Education and Injury Prevention.

Presentation Summary

Ms. Woodke provided conference attendees with a view into the complex undertaking of building a collaborative network within an institution. Internal, or intra-institutional, collaboration is imperative to create successful distance education programs and she describes her experience with this at UTTC. The following is a summary of Ms. Woodke's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the presentation.

United Tribes Technical College (UTTC), located in Bismarck, North Dakota, has a student enrollment representing over 60 tribes from across the United States. While many tribal communities now have their own tribal colleges, UTTC serves a great number of native students who do not have a college convenient to them or live away from their tribal homes. More and more Indian students are expressing an interest in remaining in their communities and to increase access to educational opportunity to an even greater number of these students, UTTC chose to venture into the world of online education three years ago [<http://courses.uttc.edu/>].

After researching employment statistics for the state and discovering that many of those with jobs still remain at the poverty level, critical needs areas were determined and distance education programs designed to boost education levels of employees in these field were designed. Courses in early childhood education, health, and criminal justice, among others have been developed to meet the workforce needs of agencies such as Head Start, Indian Health Service, and tribal police.

Distance education at UTTC is web-based. It was decided that WebCT was not the best fit for UTTC, so they chose to design their own platform. All courses are designed to be culturally-sensitive and relevant.

As UTTC began to develop their distance education program, they sought accreditation from their regional accreditation body, the North Central Association. Using NCA's *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* [http://www.ncacihe.org/resources/electronic_degrees/index.html] to guide their efforts, distance education staff at UTTC found they needed to involve other UTTC departments, faculty, and staff in the process. This began a long process of collaboration that at times proved very difficult to engender. Eventually, Ms. Woodke and other UTTC distance education staff were able to bolster campus-wide support and involvement in the development and delivery of distance learning programs, thereby following NCA guidelines and ultimately receiving accreditation.

The following changes in procedure were necessary to serve the distance education students at a level acceptable to NCA:

- Administratively, distance education program development at UTTC required leadership support from institution administrators, Information Technology Department cooperation to develop their own distance learning platform, and integrated data management processes through the implementation of a Jenzabar system directed under the supervision of the college business office;
- Academically, distance education program development at UTTC required new programming, support from deans through faculty buy-in and training, understanding instructional design for e-learning, online course layout and components, consistent expectations, and best practices in instruction and assessment; and
- in the area of student services, distance education program development at UTTC required

adjustments in recruitment, pre-enrollment advising and readiness assessment, admissions, financial aid, registrar, advising, community building, commencement, and library services.

These changes and the development of a successful distance education program at UTTC would not have been possible without removing the silos within the college and coming to share knowledge, decision-making, and ownership of all learning.

Side note: UTTC also collaborates with other tribal colleges to share courses, students, and instructors. Similar to the SAIL Project philosophy (see S. Perez presentation summary), the home institutions of online learners benefit by receiving tuition from the students and other funding/monies generated through full-time equivalent student counts.

Questions & Answers

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

Session 1

Question: *What is your minimum class enrollment size? Do you sometimes cancel courses?*

Answer: Faculty determine the course cap, and this is especially important when the course is writing intensive. We never cancel courses at Rio Salado – that’s part of our policy. (K. Mills)

Class size is normally determined as to what will support that faculty member’s salary for the course. Most classes are between 8-20 students. Our classes expect interaction between students and the instructor, and that’s hard to achieve well, if you go beyond 20 students. (L. Woodke)

Since partner colleges contribute courses, it depends on the preferences of the individual college providing the course. We normally expect new sections to be added if we exceed enrollment cap numbers. (S. Perez)

Question: *Regarding the SAIL Project, how do you calculate overhead to send back to the course source institution?*

Answer: Leasing fees assigned to courses are determined through negotiations with the individual colleges. Fees for courses vary, but for most part students pay approximately \$50 per credit hour. (S. Perez)

Question: *What about older students who do not even know how to turn on a computer?*

Answer: We provide technical assistance to all students. The technology gap is narrowing and technology is becoming more user friendly. If they can find us online, then they can usually attend one of our courses without any problems. (L. Woodke)

We have a Successful Start Orientation online, on CD-ROM, and face-to-face. Students are notified of the orientation with a postcard, and then they choose whichever option they are most comfortable with. (K. Mills)

We have a lab setting available for students who need help as well as ITV interactive studios with support to assist learners. (R. Subia)

Question: *For any given course what are your costs?*

Answer: There are a variety of hard and soft costs, and those are difficult to ascertain definitively. Our adjunct instructors develop courses and are paid the same as if they were teaching, or given release time. (L. Woodke)

We have a variety of support people for development including web technicians, programmers, editors and proofers. Their costs are very difficult to determine exactly. We give faculty release time or pay for someone else to develop a

course. New course development costs approximately \$10K; course revisions are less than \$5K. (K. Mills)

The handout (The Hidden Costs of Distance Learning) contains two citations of websites that can help you figure out cost of course development online. (S. Perez)

Session 2

Question: *How do you advise students on whether or not to take a course?*

Answer: We have a self assessment survey and a technical requirements checklist available for students to determine their preparedness themselves. New online students are also immediately assigned an advisor. (K. Mills)

Question: *If the institution buying the specialty course through SAIL does not have library and reference support materials, how do you address this need?*

Answer: This has never been an issue for us; all of our partner institutions have most services online. (S. Perez)

Question: *When you changed traditional face-to-face courses into WebCT courses, how different did teaching the course become?*

Answer: We had to make it really easy to manage online courses so that we could get faculty buy-in. (L. Woodke)

Question: *How do you test non-objectively?*

Answer: Our tests are in both objective and subjective formats. Both scores are combined for the grade. We are trying to integrate alternative assessment models. (K. Mills)

UTTC focuses on grading discussions with a rubric to measure if students are getting concepts. (L. Woodke)

Question: *What is the rate of completion for UTTC?*

Answer: UTTC has a 65% successful completion rate. The most common reason students do not complete is that they have unrealistic expectations. (L. Woodke)

I second that notion. Based on our studies of student dropouts, we find our students also have unrealistic expectations. But, due to the rolling start policy we tend to pick up students that have dropped out at a later date. (K. Mills)

Question: *Do you think that the distance education lab model is more appropriate for students?*

Answer: The only time Rio Salado has used this model is with the Reachout program. (K. Mills)

SAIL is developing courses using a hybrid model, with some on-campus learning and some monitored online discussion. Some courses require a lab, so lab instructors are built in. (S. Perez)

Question: *What are your partnerships with high schools like?*

Answer: We have not aggressively established these kinds of partnerships. However, Rio Salado does have dual credit high school students from Arizona. But, we don't have formal partnerships with high schools. (K. Mills)

Hewlett Packard has a project for delivery of advanced placement high school courses utilizing reusable learning objects. But, it is not part of the League or SAIL. (S. Perez)

We also haven't gone after high school collaborations. UTTC has found that recent high school graduates are less likely to complete online courses. Students who have work and life experience and are returning to school seem to make better students. (L. Woodke)

Question: *At Tesuque Pueblo in New Mexico, we have a huge high school drop out problem. We have had success in providing good jobs without a high school education. We do have a great scholarship program for those who want to go onto college, but very few students are partaking. We are also concerned with the home focus of distance education when students want to go off the reservation and get experience before returning home.*

Answer: With us, one of the obstacles would be that UTTC only accept students with a high school diploma. (L. Woodke)

Question: *To what degree is the cohort design successful?*

Answer: Our cohorts are, on average, 90% successful (K. Mills)

Session 3

Question: *Students like to interact with other students - how does that work with rolling starts at Rio Salado?*

Answer: Rio Salado does provide an unmonitored chat room for all students. In general, we do not provide for student-to-student interaction – interaction is mostly with the instructor. (K. Mills)

Question (directed to K. Mills): *What is the degree of transferability of your courses?*

Answer: Most of our courses will transfer to Stanford University. We are accredited with the North Central Association and we have very little problem with transferability. (K. Mills)

Question: *Testing is an elaborate process. How do you deal with proctoring?*

Answer: We try to use other institutions close to students for proctored testing. Once contact is established with an agency to proctor for testing at locations such as libraries and other post secondary institutions, then Rio Salado deals directly with the proctor. (K. Mills)

Question: *At SAIL, who teaches leased courses?*

Answer: It depends. Rio Salado Community College, a SAIL partner, only uses their instructors. That's their model. If you have an OSHA certified instructor on your campus, that person can teach. Or you can lease an instructor in addition to the course content. (S. Perez)