

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 883

RC 021 437

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 TITLE Pinon Preparation Program (PPP): Meeting the Needs of Rural Native American Students through Site-Based Education Programs.  
 PUB DATE 1998-03-00  
 NOTE 7p.; In: Coming Together: Preparing for Rural Special Education in the 21st Century. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (18th, Charleston, SC, March 25-28, 1998); see RC 021 434.  
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; \*American Indian Education; College School Cooperation; College Students; Elementary Secondary Education; \*Extension Education; Higher Education; \*Navajo (Nation); Nontraditional Students; Participatory Research; \*Rural American Indians; Social Support Groups; Student Attitudes; \*Student Experience; Student Needs; \*Teacher Education Programs  
 IDENTIFIERS Northern Arizona University; Pinon Unified School District AZ

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experiences of Navajo college students participating in a site-based teacher preparation program in a remote community on a Navajo Reservation. The 10 students (9 women and 1 man) work as teaching assistants in the Pinon Unified School District (Arizona). Having previously completed required Liberal Studies courses, the students take all of the courses needed to become certified elementary and special education teachers during the 2-year site-based program. The courses are taught by a resident and a visiting professor from Northern Arizona University. As part of the research team, the students wrote detailed life stories that explored who and what had impacted their decision to become a teacher. In addition, they were interviewed about the benefits of having a site-based program in their community, as well as the barriers they faced in a traditional university setting. Major themes that emerged were family and community support, financial constraints, and the limited educational opportunities on the Navajo Nation. While community colleges offer coursework at various reservation sites, students must still spend their final 2 years of college away from home to complete their degrees. Site-based programs allow students to remain in their communities, where they continue to receive the support of family and culture, fulfill their responsibilities to families and communities, and live where the cost of living is not a burden. (SV)

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ED 417 883

Piñon Preparation Program (PPP): Meeting the Needs of Rural Native American Students Through Site-based Education Programs

Navajo children rarely see a Navajo teacher. There are just too few of them available. As a result, few of these kids ever even think about becoming a teacher themselves. It's a vicious circle. And I really don't see an end to it in sight. The bottom line is that we need more Navajo teachers out there (Stuart, 1963, p.22).

As this early quote indicates, the issue of the shortage of Native American teachers has been discussed among educational scholars since as early as 1963. Although a variety of approaches have been taken in order to increase the number of Native American educators, only a modest increase has resulted since the 1960s. Recent statistics suggest that only 1% of the teachers in the United States are Native American (Teaching Tolerance Magazine, 1998, p. 12). These programs have ranged from scholarships and other incentives to the development of programs that specifically address the needs of Native American students seeking a college education. For example, Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence Kansas developed a teacher education program that specifically addresses the issue of preparing Native American teachers to work in Native American schools. Other colleges of education and universities have actually taken their programs on the road and set up teacher education programs in the reservation communities. Since 1992, Northern Arizona University (NAU) and the Center for Excellence in Education (CEE) has developed several programs across the Navajo Nation. These programs provide Navajo students with the opportunity to obtain their elementary methods courses and/or their special education coursework in their own communities.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Navajo college students who currently participate in the Piñon Preparation Program in Piñon, Arizona. In this paper we explore the use of site-based delivery as a means for improving retention and graduation rates of rural Navajo students. We also discuss ways in which the stress of finances and family responsibilities is alleviated through community based university programs.

Piñon Preparation Program

The Piñon Preparation Program (PPP) began during the Fall of 1997. Piñon, a very remote community located on the Navajo Reservation, is nestled between First Mesa, Second Mesa and Black Mesa and offers spectacular views of the sun rising and setting on the surrounding mesas. It is approximately 30 miles northeast of Second Mesa, which is on the Hopi reservation and 45 miles southwest of Chinle and Canyon de Chelly, a sacred place for the Navajos. Except for one two lane paved road, Piñon is accessible only by dirt road. During inclement weather, this leaves only one means of access into and out of Piñon. By paved road, Piñon is about a four hour drive from the main campus of NAU in Flagstaff, Arizona. If the weather is pleasant, alternate routes over several miles of dirt road reduces the travel time to two and a half hours. The Piñon Unified School District (PUSD), the Navajo Nation, Bashas (a local chain of grocery stores) and traditional artistic

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endeavors such as sandpainting, silversmithing and weaving are the main sources of employment.

The PPP is a partnership between the CEE and the Piñon Unified School District. This project is funded by a subcontract that is supported by a federally funded Title VII grant. All the participants in the project are Navajo. Nine are employed by the school district as teacher assistants. One student is a community member and has been assigned to a classroom in one of the PUSD schools. The students in this project made a two year commitment to the program. During this two year period the students receive all of the courses needed to become certified elementary and special education teachers. Prior to their participation in this program, the students took Liberal Studies courses required for admission to the CEE teacher education program and for graduation from NAU. They complete all of their professional education courses on site. In the first three semesters, the students take their foundations, methods, assessment and curriculum courses and their final semester they do their student teaching. The students continue to work in their classrooms until 2:00 in the afternoon. Then, they are released to attend their university classes until 5:00 p.m. Most of the classes are taught by the Project Manager, a faculty member of NAU who lives on site in Piñon. The Project Manager is also responsible for supervision of the students in their classroom placements. Approximately every other week, a faculty member from the main campus in Flagstaff goes to Piñon and teaches all of the classes that week. This releases the Project Manager to do more observations of the students in their classrooms.

### **Methodology**

This study used life stories to explore the experiences of ten Navajo pre-service teachers. The factors that enable and constrain Native Americans to succeed in higher education settings were examined, especially as these factors relate to the students' goals of obtaining certification in elementary and special education. All ten of the pre-service teachers wrote detailed life stories that explored who and what had impacted their decision to become a teacher. In addition, they were interviewed about the benefits of having a site-based program in their community as well as the barriers they faced in obtaining a degree in a traditional university setting. The students were part of the research team for this study and were responsible for collecting the data. These undergraduate students, with the assistance of their university professors, analyzed the data thematically providing rich, detailed descriptions of the experiences of these pre-service teachers. Several themes emerged from the interview data that provide insight regarding the enablers and stressors that these students face in their participation in higher education. These themes were:

1. Family and community support,
2. Financial constraints, and
3. Limited educational opportunities on the Navajo Nation.

### **Participant Portraits**

As discussed in the previous section the participants in this study are currently enrolled in the Piñon Preparation Program. In the Table 1.1, the students provide a brief portrait of themselves. The students chose to select pseudonyms as a means of preserving their anonymity.

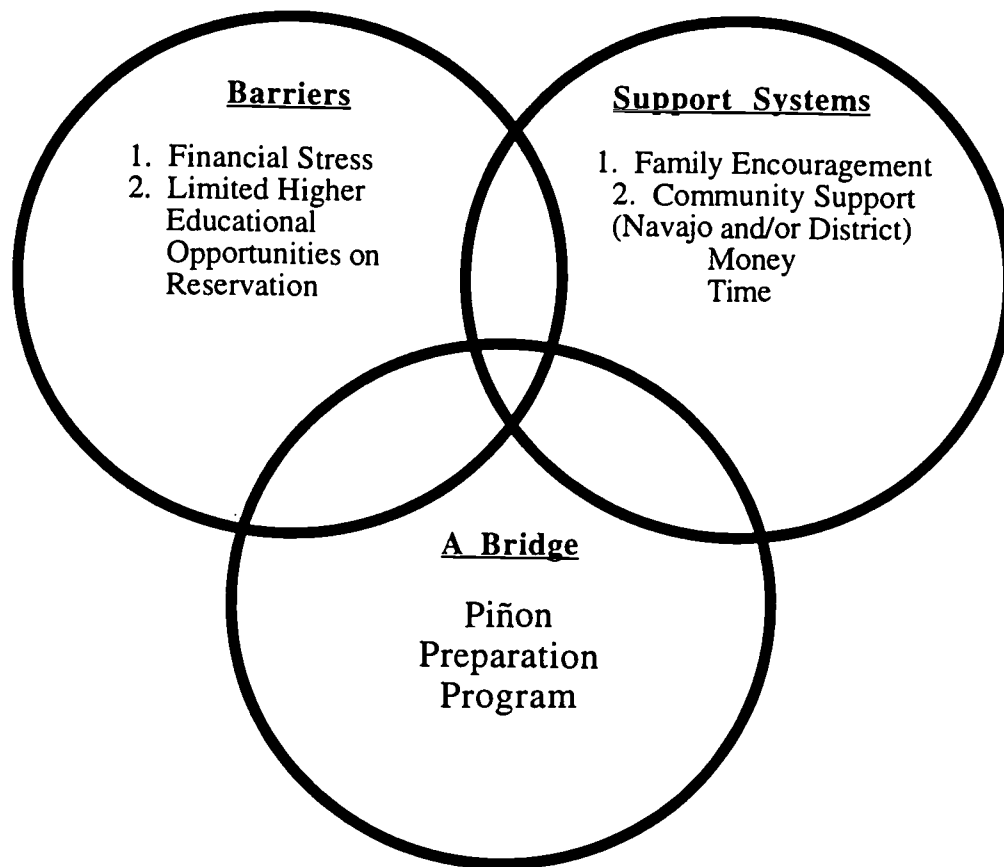
**Table 1.1 Participant Descriptions**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Paula</b>	Paula loves to read Tony Hillerman's books. She is married and has children of her own. She is a reading tutor and she wants to teach on the reservation.
<b>Kelly</b>	Kelly is a mother to four boys. She encourages her boys to read daily and firmly believes as a parent it is important to be a guidance to their education. As a parent, she's involved with her boy's education at school and at home.
<b>Nicole</b>	Nicole is a 27 year old Navajo Indian female who decided to go into education for her own kids and to educate the younger generation. She has been inspired by an aunt and older sister to continue her education.
<b>Valerie</b>	Valerie is an outgoing person who has been dedicated to teach young children since the age of fourteen. She was inspired to become a teacher by her own nieces and nephews.
<b>Susan:</b>	When Susan turned 30 years old, she started thinking about going back to school because she always wanted to continue to learn and she likes to teach students. She has four children and likes to take care of them. She enrolled at Dine College in 1993. Her chosen career is elementary education. She was inspired by her 8th grade teacher (Mrs. Begay) when she attended school at Chinle Boarding School.
<b>Dee</b>	Dee is shy and friendly. She takes her education seriously and wants to be a real good teacher. She is dedicated to her students.
<b>Keri</b>	Keri is a twenty-eight year old Native American Indian from the southwest. She is excited about teaching her students.
<b>Donna</b>	Donna is thirty-eight years old and has a cat named Brody. She is willing to teach the Navajo children to become better learners and to understand the English language.
<b>Diné</b>	Diné is a very proud Dad with four boys. He has a nice wife and loves to teach children.
<b>Mercedes</b>	Mercedes likes to laugh and to be friendly. She enjoys meeting new people and going places.

### Introduction

In this study, we found that the families, community and Navajo culture provided these students with support and encouragement to seek a degree in higher education. These enablers took many forms from actual financial support to encouragement that stressed the importance of obtaining an education. We also found that while these students had these enablers, the stressors and/or barriers they faced often outweighed the enablers and prohibited them from obtaining a degree in higher education. As illustrated by the following diagram, the creation of a community-based program provided a way in which to reduce the stressors encountered by these students and enabled them to enroll in a university program in elementary and special education. Although site-based programs can not completely alleviate the stressors and barriers encountered by these students, they can make a difference and serve as one model for creating a higher education environment that recognizes and addresses the needs of rural Native American students. By creating learning environments within the students' communities, they are able to take advantage of the support systems that they have in their community and to face stressors that are manageable rather than insurmountable. In the following sections of this paper, we discuss each of the enablers and stressors in greater detail, as well as discuss how this program has

been able to bridge the gap between the enablers and stressors and make a degree in higher education possible.



### **Family and Community Support**

In the Navajo culture, one's membership in a family unit or a clan brings about specific responsibilities and relationships with the other members of the family. These family responsibilities are very important and are strongly tied to the traditions and values of the Navajo culture. Often the students find themselves supported and encouraged by family elders and by Navajo communities to obtain an education. At the same time and their own sense of duty and responsibility for children and families require them to stay home on the reservation. In her life story, Donna describes the influence that her grandfather had upon her pursuit of an education:

I have great respect for my grandfather and his influence on who I am today: He encouraged me to learn the language of the Anglos, but at the same time my grandfather taught us not to forget our Navajo language and the cultural teaching that he and my parents had taught us.

Another student, Kelly, describes her sense of responsibility to her own family and why this kept her from attending a college campus away from the Navajo Reservation:

Well, I would say, it was too far from home for me, and I think I would rather stay closer to family, to my mother and I think that would be my

main reason (for not obtaining a degree off the Reservation). And plus I have started a family, so I couldn't just move off the Reservation...

In addition to the support that the students receive from their families, the Navajo Nation also provides many Navajo students with scholarship and stipends to support their pursuit of a degree in higher education. In the case of the PPP, the PUSD applied for a Title VII grant which funded this site-based program through a subcontract with NAU. In addition, the school district has been supportive in other ways, such as providing the students with a flexible work schedule that allows them to begin their university classes at 2:00 p.m. on Monday through Thursday.

Providing site-based higher education programs like the partnership program between NAU and PUSD for Navajo students helps to alleviate the conflict that often arises between the desire to obtain an education and the responsibility they have to their families. Being able to take their college coursework close to home enables them to pursue their degree and keep up close ties to their family and culture. Talk more about the support they receive from tribe and district.

## **Barriers to Campus-based Higher Education**

### **Limited Educational Opportunities on the Reservation**

There are currently many community colleges that offer coursework at various sites throughout the Navajo Nation. Although the community colleges enable the student to take courses in their own community for two years, the students must still spend their junior and senior year away from home in order to complete their degrees. Paula talks about the barriers which kept her from obtaining a degree prior to the PPP she states

the reason that kept me from getting a degree before I entered PPP was I ... had to travel quite a ways to take classes and (my) financial situation ... kept me from taking classes too. So those are some of the things that kept me from getting my degree.

When four year institutions provide opportunities where the two year colleges leave off, the students are able to complete their degrees without imposing undue financial constraints upon them. The same student identifies the following as a benefit of taking NAU classes at NAU. "I don't have to worry about child care or driving so many miles to attend an evening class."

### **Financial Support**

One of the major barriers which impact many Native American student's decision to attend college off the reservation is the lack of financial resources. Many prospective students are hesitant to leave behind the jobs they have on the reservation and to battle a

system of financial support which is not always very user-friendly. Native American students in need of financial assistance to complete their higher education must often navigate through a complex and, from their perspective, often mysterious system of agencies including the Tribal Scholarship Office, the campus office of financial aid, and others (Delany-Barmann, Prater and Minner, 1998, p.10).

The students in the PPP experience great financial difficulties with attending college off the reservation. Dee believes that attending classes in her community enables her to pursue her college degree because "it was right close to home and you keep your full time job and go

to school while you work.” Site-based programs such as the partnership between the NAU and the Piñon Unified School District allow students to continue to keep their jobs. Get name adds that a major concern is “If I go back to school, what source of income would I have to support my family? Plus, the cost of living in the cities is too much.” Another added benefit is that since the students are employed in a school and taking education coursework, they can often apply ideas and strategies learned in class the next day in the classroom.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Site-based delivery of teacher education programs is one way in which the shortage of Native American teachers can be addressed. These programs alleviate to some extent the barriers many of these students face in obtaining a bachelor’s degree. Since the students remain in their communities, they continue to receive support of their family and culture and to fulfill the responsibilities that they have to their communities and families. These programs alleviate the stress that arises over the lack of financial support many students experience when they leave the reservation and move to the cities to complete their degrees. Site-based programs enable them to keep their jobs and to continue to live in a community where the cost of living is not a burden. Similar programs have had nearly 100% retention and graduation rates. If institutions of higher education are genuinely concerned with meeting the needs of rural Native American students, as well as with their retention and graduation, the use of site-based education programs is one way in which to provide these students with an opportunity to succeed.

\*The NAU Research Team consists of the following: Begay, M., Bitsui, S., Blie, L., Bob, L., Bob, S., Castillo, T., Denny, V., Gonnie, J., Hoskie, L., Jim, O.

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