

# Building a Bridge to Economic Independence: Establishing a 1994 Land-Grant Extension Project

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The intent of the Native American Pastoral Textile Project (NAPT) is to capitalize on the capacity of the traditional Native American Indian textile industry and establish a 1994 land-grant extension program while maintaining the cultural integrity of the target group. The NAPT is based at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and its target groups are rural reservation communities located in the Southwestern United States. The tribal groups live in extremely geographically isolated rural areas and have few viable economic opportunities. Taking advantage of their resources, skills, and interests makes the most sense.

Maintaining traditional culture in a modern ever-changing world is a major concern in native communities. How can the traditional culture be passed on and preserved in the youth? Community assessments, conducted through surveys and interviews, have revealed that the best way to preserve the culture is to make it economically viable. Economic growth is accomplished through the participants' application of advanced techniques taught on the subjects of textile and wool industry practices on the reservation.

Founding educational outreach on advancing native practices - used in producing products from local small farm flocks and available natural resources - makes practical the federal and state government goals of assisting rural citizens in maintaining their small farms and achieving greater economic self-sufficiency. Their lifestyle is preserved, and the project illustrates, through the traditional native weaving industry, that small farm agricultural economic development, family well-being and Native American culture can be positively impacted. Through project activities the participants attain practical life skills that combine their artistry and their rural lifestyle, add value to their readily available resources, and create a bridge to economic independence.

The Native American Pastoral Textile Project applies the following strategies:

**Strategy 1.** Informal introduction of the textile trade as an economic solution to local economic needs, the

collection of interest survey data, interviews, site visits, and meeting in tribal communities

As members were recruited they were asked to file a volunteer membership form. Attached to the form was an interest survey containing 33 project workshops including weaving, shearing, flock management, plant dyes, etc. The constituents were asked to mark an (X) in areas they were interested in learning and mark a (Y) in areas they could help develop. The volunteer member form and survey purpose is three-fold: 1) to determine who is interested in participating, 2) to determine what they are interested in learning, and 3) to determine how they can contribute.

**Results:** Permission for project activities is approved by the tribal government. Interviews from more than 450 tribal members in various locations were obtained. A total of 205 people registered a volunteer membership form in the first 11 months of operation. Forty-six percent of registered volunteer members did not fill out the survey, largely due to the high illiteracy rate among the target group. Many participants' communication skills are limited to the spoken Navajo language.

Of the remaining 54%, the majority of participants were interested in learning traditional tribal weaving techniques, natural dyes, shearing for market value, management of farm flocks, and educating their youth about preserving traditions. They want practical and applicable education that they can use in their daily lives. The most active core participants attending workshops did not fill out membership forms or surveys, and they only speak Navajo.

**Challenge:** With \$5,000 per month, the budget only supports one full-time employee, travel expenses, and a little more than supplemental workshop materials. How can the project reach its goals and impact multiple target groups over a four-state region with limited finances?

**Strategy 2.** Workshops and work-group development approached on a grassroots organizational level. Community leaders are identified who can call together the work group and keep them working toward goals

between formal workshops. Community volunteers conduct workshops with the project instructor. Workshops are targeted to the elderly population in senior centers. Intergenerational training is used to provide a vehicle for youth to participate with elders in maintaining their cultural heritage and starting a new business. Workshops are geared to fostering independent work-group development.

**Results:** Elders are given the opportunity to fulfill their social responsibilities: to pass on tradition, to invest time in teaching their knowledge to the youth, and to convey the economic and cultural benefits of enhancing and continuing their pastoral lifestyle. This stabilizes family values while enjoining them in an entrepreneurial enterprise.

Work groups were formed in Thoreau Navajo Chapter, Canoncito Navajo Band, Whitehorse Lake Navajo Chapter, Jicarilla Apache, Central Navajo-Tsaile Arizona, and Mescalero Apache. Thoreau and Canoncito have begun product design and some participants have begun selling their work. Fifty-eight participants were trained in traditional weaving and continue to train other work group members.

**Challenge:** Loss of project funding, provision of services to stakeholders

**Strategy 3:** Partnerships sought

Though cooperative partnerships, the NAPT project assists and is assisted in presenting conferences and workshops that raise public awareness and address issues concerning the environment, land management, small farming, cultural preservation, and other challenges facing rural tribal populations. Joint partners provide financial support, specialized services, and resources that make feasible the goal of providing effective extension education.

**Results:**

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) provides the 1994 Land-Grant Tribal Extension Program funding. CSREES not only grants financial support, but it also acts as a liaison for networking contacts and technical information support. CSREES staff is true to their partnership and has acted as mentors and given guidance beyond the call of duty. Through their mentoring assistance, IAIA, who lost the funding in Fiscal Year 1998, has managed to establish a fundable project for 1999.

- New Mexico State University, Northern District Extension Service's 1862 land-grant institution, provides local partnership contacts and technical assistance in project design, development, and planning. NMSU also provided funding during FY 1998 that enabled the project to make it through to the FY 1999 CSREES funding cycle.

- The Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation provides funding for support of two work groups and the project base.

- Dine College, Tsaile Campus, and Crownpoint Institute of Technology, 1994 land-grant institutions, collaborate on exhibits, joint conferences, special events, and workshops. They provide field support and facilities while NAPT is working in their area.

- The Navajo Nation Veterinary Services partnered to realize the reservation-wide initiative to revitalize the wool industry.

- County and tribal extension agents, nonprofit organizations, and federal and state agencies all play a collaborative role in providing services, education, and opportunities for project participants' economic as well as intellectual growth.

- Tribal government partnerships are important; they provide facilities and organizational support of work group and workshop activities.

**Strategy 4:** Media and Public Relations

Project activities are announced through press releases. Financial supporters are gratefully recognized. Volunteers are always given credit for their contributions. Activities are photographed and used for press releases.

**Results:** Participants are given a sense of accomplishment when their photos come out in local newspapers. The Navajo Times has been very good to the project and has covered the project activities repeatedly over the last year. Gallup Independent covers the project, along with Indian Country Today and other native newspapers. This builds support on all levels.

**Challenge:** Of all the challenges faced in establishing an effective 1994 extension program, the most precarious is the lack of internal support for the project. The one employee who takes on such a feat is often burdened with all the responsibilities for the project's design, development, and implementation. There is lack of help available internally due to the already overextended support staff, and the lack of understanding of project scope from other coworkers. Of utmost concern is the need to educate the administration regarding land-grant

status. Lack of financial resources permeates not only the target groups and project, but it is a major issue for the institutions themselves. Most tribal colleges struggle with a year-to-year existence, not knowing if they will be able to survive.

What makes this challenge most difficult is that the foundation of the project is on fragile ground. Internally the institutional body is unable, even if willing, to absorb any more work.

The project director must fulfill all the internal institutional requirements to meet grant obligations, do all the office and field work, and also financially develop the project. The work groups begin to disintegrate when attention is focused in the office on financial development. While the work groups are in their incubation stage they feel dependent on the project director for leadership. When the project director returns to the field, the groups do regroup, but with less confidence. Under the present circumstances there is a successful bridge from isolated rural tribal communities to the economic resources in the global market, but the crossing is fragile. The Native American Pastoral Textile project desperately needs more funding for support staff and a sustained commitment from the host institution to the project.