

ACCENT ON STUDENT SUCCESS: ENGAGED TOGETHER IN SERVICE

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The Tohono O'odham Nation faces many challenges to bring higher education to the people. General education at Tohono O'odham Community College is starting to walk in the footsteps of course-embedded service learning, engaged in for decades by the apprenticeship programs on the Nation. The concept of service learning is familiar, and new formal ways to bring service learning to communities are exciting for students, faculty, and community members.

The Tohono O'odham Community College (TOCC) is located in southern Arizona on the Tohono O'odham Nation, an American Indian Reservation, and encompasses approximately 2.8 million acres in rural areas of the Sonoran Desert. Approximately seventy-five miles of the Nation's southern boundary is the international boundary of the United States and Mexico, which effectively splits the Nation so that many tribal members live south of the international boundary, as they have for generations. The Tohono O'odham (Desert People) live in about 70 communities scattered throughout the Nation and throughout the Mexican state of Sonora. The communities are both geographically and culturally isolated from mainstream society. Tribal industry focuses on gaming and ranching; the major employers on the Nation are the tribal government and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

Tribal membership numbers more than 28,000, with approximately half the members residing on the Nation. The Tohono O'odham population is fairly young, with the median age of twenty-six years old. According to the 2000 U.S. census, 38% of adults 25 years of age and older do not have a high school diploma. Nearly 60% of individuals 16 years and older are not employed, and the median family income for four is about \$20,200. Isolation is a primary contributor to the lack of available educational and economical opportunities, with no public transportation available, and many families living in remote locations without a vehicle. In 2000, 20% of the Nation's members had earned some college credits from institutes of higher learning off the reservation. Forty percent of the families on the reservation are below the 1999 poverty line, and 55% of the homes headed by a female householder, with no husband present, with related children below five years old were below the poverty line.

In 1998, the tribal government, after many years of deep thought and discussion, passed a resolution that established the tribal community college. Under the "wing" of Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona, Tohono O'odham Community College held its first classes during the summer of 2000, and celebrated its first commencement in 2001. The college received candidacy status for accreditation in 2003 from the Higher Learning Commission, North Central Association, and in 2005 became a completely separate, fully accredited community college. The student population of the college is made up of first generation college students, with a median age of thirty-two years old, and a single working mother. The college has about 250

students, most of whom are part-time students. Spring 2007 FTE was 122. Fifteen full-time faculty are employed, plus several adjunct faculty.

The college, with approximately 70 employees, is temporarily located in Sells, the headquarters of the Nation. Most services, such as the hospital, the K-12 schools, the tribal government offices, the police headquarters, Boys and Girls Club, and local businesses are located in Sells, which is approximately sixty miles southwest of the city of Tucson. The college has two campuses approximately four miles apart: the West Campus houses GED, occupational and apprenticeship programs, and the agriculture and MIS programs. Central Campus houses general education programs, the library, administrative services, and student services. Two permanent sites have been selected for new campuses, with groundbreaking at one of the sites.

The Vision and Mission of the college are as follows:

VISION - Our vision is to become the Tohono O'odham Nation's center for higher education, and to enhance the Nation's participation in the local, state, national and global communities.

MISSION - Our mission is to enhance the unique Tohono O'odham *Himdag* (culture) by strengthening individuals, families and communities through holistic quality higher education services. These services will include research opportunities and programs that address academic, life and developmental skills.

SERVICE LEARNING AT TOHONO O'ODHAM COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Formal service learning first began in the Building and Construction Trades Apprenticeship program of the college, formerly the Career Center, which was put in place by the Tohono O'odham Nation prior to the establishment of the college. In 2000, the Career Center merged with the college, bringing with it a tradition in service learning for students in the community. The Apprenticeship programs continued their legacy of service learning, and gained national and statewide attention in 2006 for their excellence and commitment to service learning, winning the prestigious Charles R. Huggins Community Service Award. The Tohono O'odham Community College Apprenticeship programs are a national and a statewide model for quality, community service student education. Currently the Apprenticeship programs are constructing the restrooms for the newly built Boys and Girls Club in Sells.

The *Accent on Student Success: Engaged Together in Service (ASSETS)* grant activities initiated formal service learning in 2006 for general education at the college. Service learning, by definition, fits right into the *Himdag* of the Tohono O'odham, and is part of the traditional way of life. Any people or culture that have managed to live for hundreds of years in the desert must have had certain values, skills and knowledge to survive, specifically by sharing and helping one another. Traditionally, young people learned to work together to help the elders,

families, communities and each other. The Tohono O'odham maintain a strong, historical work ethic, of which service learning is part and parcel, and not a new concept at all.

The Social Welfare instructor indicated a strong desire to participate in service learning. Because of her interest, the instructor participated in several service learning meetings and conferences to become better acquainted with the ASSETS service learning concepts and the grant program. Beginning the service learning project was time extensive for several reasons. The instructor worked with another faculty to prepare the appropriate legal forms necessary for initiating a service learning project, then submitted them to the college attorney for review and revision. The geographic location of the college required that tribal entities were the community partners, some of which were a considerable distance away on the reservation. The approval process took longer than expected, and required the instructor to visit and discuss service learning several times with potential community partners. The approval process for being a community partner was lengthy, involving tribal, and sometimes BIA approval, and many issues had to be amicably resolved before community partners would commit.

The next step was to establish the college faculty and staff buy-in to the service learning concept and into the program. The instructor presented many service learning presentations involving PowerPoint, DVD, and videos presentations at almost every faculty meeting, and all staff and Division meetings over a six-month period. Always resourceful, the instructor was able to acquire effective service learning materials that were specifically aimed at tribal education. The college also brought in two different service learning consultants who provided one two-day workshop, and one full-day workshop for all college employees.

COURSE-EMBEDDED SERVICE LEARNING

The Introduction to Social Welfare (SSE 110) class of nine students and the instructor chose the *2007 National Make a Difference Day* to begin their service learning project at the Tohono O'odham Nation Children's Home. The class recognized all the staff at the Home for their dedication and tireless work, and included the children living there. To honor all at the Home, a barbeque meal was prepared and served by the students and instructor to the workers and the children. The nine students in the class performed a total of 36 service learning hours during this project. The purpose of the service learning project was to express appreciation to the Home staff for all the important work they do with the children, and to give them an afternoon off. The staff was able to relax, and the students worked and played with the children.

Before describing the next service learning project, a basic historical overview is necessary in order to understand its true value. The Native people of this region were living here at the time the Spanish conquistadors came looking for gold in the 1500s and 1600s. The Tohono O'odham were greatly influenced by these first foreign visitors to their homelands, particularly by the Spanish missionaries because of the many new methods of farming and livestock raising they taught to the Native people. The missionaries also introduced Christianity and the formal religion of Catholicism to the Tohono O'odham. Even today, many of the people are baptized

Catholics, and religion plays a major role in the life of the communities throughout the Tohono O'odham Nation.

The next service learning project also was conducted by the Introduction to Social Welfare (SSE 110) class in late October 2006. Their community partner was a church. In the Spanish and the Tohono O'odham Catholic calendar, All Souls Feast Day is celebrated every November 2nd, and is an important religious ceremonial feast day for these two groups of people. On that day, every family and every community commemorate all the family and community members who have passed on to the next world. As a part of the celebration, but prior to the actual day, much cleaning and preparation must take place, such as cleaning the graves at the cemeteries, painting the simple white crosses that adorn the dirt mound graves, and making and placing homemade crepe paper flowers and decorations on the graves. This is the project that the class participated in one October Saturday from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM. Students also recruited fifteen other family and community members for this project. Ten students logged in 39 service learning hours on this day. When they went home that day, the cemetery was beautiful in its fresh paint, clean graves and surrounding areas, with beautiful flowers and decorations on every grave.

This year, Tohono O'odham Community College celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr. Day with a workshop to share the life of this good person with everyone who was able to attend. The theme of the workshop was to present Dr. King's commitment to doing service in one's community. During the workshop, students were strongly encouraged to perform a service learning activity in their home community, and later to share their reflections about the activity in their classes. The majority of students who attended the workshop completed this additional project.

During the spring 2007 semester, the Domestic Violence: Causes and Cure (SSE 140) class of about fifteen students, and with the same instructor as the SSE 110 class, completed a seven-week service learning project at the Tohono O'odham Nation's only nursing care facility, the Archie Hendricks Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility, which is operated by the Tohono O'odham Nursing Care Authority. The facility has approximately sixty residents from ages 55 to about 100. The students visited with the residents, developed activities to help and engage the elders with, accompanied the residents on walks, and assisted with wheelchairs, as needed. One popular activity involved the male residents who once again had the opportunity to rope (or at least handle a rope) the artificial steer heads stuck into bales of straw that were provided by the instructor and students. Some of the ropers had not tried their skill in many years, and they had a lot of fun; joking and fine roping was shared on that day. The ropes, steer heads, and straw bales stayed behind at the facility for the residents to use again and again. At the end of the service learning project, the residents expressed how much they enjoyed the company of the students and the new activities, the staff appreciated the limited extra help, and the students learned more than they ever thought they would be able to learn from the experience.

CONCLUSION

The ASSETS program worked well in the general education division this year, even though on a limited basis. In total, approximately thirty students and one faculty participated in formal service learning classes. Another thirty students and two faculty members did informal service learning, and were not considered in this paper, and yet another faculty participated in the development of the legal documents necessary for the community partners.

The final result is that students followed through on community work within the context of their coursework, and did reflection of their service to the community. There are strong indications that there will be more service learning in future classes, and efforts are being made to increase the number of formal service learning opportunities for more students this fall, involving more faculty and more community partners. Service learning and *Himdag* go hand-in-hand at Tohono O'odham Community College.

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