



DINÉ COLLEGE

THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION OF THE NAVAJO

Office of the President

**TESTIMONY
OF
Dr. CHARLES M. ROESSEL
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NAVAJO NATION
BEFORE THE
THE ALYCE SPOTTED BEAR AND WALTER SOBOLEFF COMMISSION ON NATIVE CHILDREN
DECEMBER 3, 2020**

My name is Charles Monty Roessel and I am the president of Diné College from the Navajo Nation. Thank you, chairwoman Gloria O'Neill, vice-chairwoman Tami DeCoteau and members of the commission. I am honored to provide this testimony before the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children.

I will not bother to recite the daunting statistics facing our Native children, which are amply cited by report after report throughout the years. This commission is far more knowledgeable of this information than I. The work you have undertaken on behalf of our Native children is admirable, and I express my appreciation.

I provide this testimony as a current president of a tribal college, a former director of the Bureau of Indian Education, a former pre-k through 12 school superintendent, a community service director, and most importantly, as a father and a grandfather. I say this not to recite a resume but to give an example of my testimony and perspective that everything is related. We cannot begin to address the challenges facing our native children unless we recognize the need for a holistic approach.

I will be straight forward and to the point, in order to have any lasting impact on improving Native children's future, we must look past territories, boundaries, and silos. Too many of the past recommendations resulted in improving one agency at the expense of another agency. Let's take early childhood education. The Bureau of Indian Education, Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education all have programs that focus on pre-K education. Yet, because of specific eligibility requirements, the need is never met because the conditions are written for a different part of the country, but not Indian country. As the past superintendent of Rough Rock Community School, I dealt with this first hand with our Family and Children Education (FACE) program competing for Head Start students to the detriment of both programs. What is the result? Young students being in neither program nor receiving the education they deserve, need, and are entitled to. This is but one example, but it illustrates the impact of well-intentioned programs not being looked at holistically.

At Diné College, the first tribal college in the country, our philosophy of Sə'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóó reflects how everything is related; this pandemic has shown us that more than ever. What we knew instinctively is integral to the smooth functioning of our society. For example, as illustrated above, the need for early childhood education is more than just an education issue; it is also a child care issue, a

health issue, and an economic issue. These challenges are impacting so many other areas of our children's lives. Many times before, I have said a challenge we have is to try to move away from being in love with the problem and moving toward finding solutions. So, I will share one that reflects what tribal colleges and universities (TCU) are doing right now.

Food sovereignty is more than just an empowering phrase; it reflects what TCUs are doing to impact Native children positively. TCU's allow Native children to learn about their identity, improve the economic environment for Native peoples, improve the health of Native peoples, and maybe most importantly, show that solutions can and do come from within Indian communities. As a land grant institution, our college offers community members culturally-based agricultural education to improve economic development and encourage healthy eating. What this does is provide "supplemental income" to a family. Rather than looking for a single solution, the focus on supplemental income is a game-changer for a family that can increase their income by 20% by using their farmland. But it goes beyond that; we are also working with area K-12 schools in creating programs to create community gardens. This year, we developed our first agriculture degree and have incorporated a business component to provide the skills needed to meet new challenges. And finally, we have started one Agricultural Hub and are in the process of creating a second that offers opportunities for community families to receive the guidance, answers, and information to eat healthier, grow traditional foods while learning the culture and history of such a part of Navajo.

A founding mission of all TCUs is the teaching and learning of native culture and language. In short, it is about who we are, where we come from, and how we communicate. The belief that every Native person has a right to know this information is a challenge that TCUs address. One of the enduring lessons from this pandemic is that it forces all of us to find solutions. We cannot have the luxury of just throwing our hands up in the air. I want to share a story of a family who works at Diné College and how they chose, despite all the challenges, to celebrate the coming of age of their daughter, granddaughter, sister, aunt and niece.

When a young girl reaches puberty, the Navajo have a Kinaalda' ceremony. It is a time for celebration. Yet, during the pandemic, many ceremonies were halted. This was and is understandable. Armed with CDC guidelines, face-masks, sanitizer, and Zoom – and yes, I did say Zoom, they celebrated the coming of age for this Navajo woman. Only the immediate family was allowed in the Hogan (traditional home). The medicine man was 70 miles away but had a cell phone and provided the prayers and songs throughout the ceremony to ensure that the Holy People were welcoming the young girl to womanhood. I will never forget walking on the trail that surrounds the Diné College campus before dawn and seeing her run. Dressed in her traditional attire, she proudly ran past.

You may be wondering what this has to do with this commission or my testimony. From my perspective, it is the essence of what this commission is investigating. The idea of ceremony is important and foundational to being Native. The definition of ceremony is not a one-size-fits-all. Each individual family defines it as they try and hold onto their way of life and way of knowing. The stories passed down from generation to generation define who we are today. But what if you do not know your story? What if identity is not a word that is easily defined? How do we create the spaces for conversations on who am I? Let me tell you how Diné College is trying to answer these questions.

First, to address the mental health needs of our students and family. We have taken this lesson from the Kinaalda' and provided a space for traditional stories and prayers via Zoom or the phone. These traditional stories and prayers have allowed our families to rely on their culture, albeit in a different way, to help them get through this pandemic. We have had our traditional knowledge holders to share

stories from a Navajo perspective of the epidemic. The need for healing is addressed through prayer. Access to information is not just from the CDC; it is becoming foundational to addressing many of our challenges in our Native communities. To build on the idea of access, the college is currently developing an online Navajo language program that would be free to anyone. While it will not provide fluency yet, it gives all Navajo children access no matter where they live. As we say here at Diné College, it is not about learning the Navajo language but relearning Navajo because the language never leaves you.

Earlier I wrote about eliminating silos and looking for solutions across boundaries. On the Navajo Nation, there are 14 school districts across three states and 144 total schools (public, BIE-funded, and parochial). In addition, there are two TCUs with 10 campuses. If we could reimagine education without boundaries there would be 154 learning centers across the 26,000 square mile reservation. In other words, accessibility becomes redefined. Connectivity to broadband becomes redefined. And family education becomes redefined. Diné College is currently developing 5 “micro-campus” across the reservation. While these campuses will be operated by Diné College, all will be welcome.

Students who are attending other colleges will be able to access their online classes. Parents who are attending college can bring their elementary students and receive tutoring from work-study students. Rather than saying this micro-campus is for Diné College students, we look beyond labels and boundaries and communicate how to improve services to all students on the reservation. We are working to build partnerships with other universities, foundations, and school districts to create a shared responsibility for our children, parents, and communities. These partnerships are already bearing fruit. The Bureau of Indian Education has developed a standard MOU that will allow Diné College to utilize space in their facility but is transferable to all TCUs across the country.

In conclusion, I want to again thank the commission for allowing me this opportunity to provide testimony. The information and stories I shared provide opportunities for solutions to the many challenges facing our Native children. Diné College was founded more than 52 years ago, with a mission to be the higher education institution for the Navajo people – not the nation. This is important because it reflects the need to remember that individuals build the nation and tribal colleges and universities have at its foundational core the mission to build strong Indian nations. This of course cannot be done without addressing the needs of our children. I hope that these examples of solutions will provide some insight into a more holistic approach to your work. I welcome any questions you may have.