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Addressing the Education Challenges for Native Students

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The novel coronavirus pandemic has affected many students, but one student group that may be affected more dramatically than others is Native Americans. Many of our tribal reservations across the country, and here in Arizona, have been dealing with the digital divide since long before schools closed in March, hindering students' abilities to complete their coursework. On top of that, many tribes were hit hard by the virus – often due to a lack of resources, like access to grocery stores, or even running water. We spoke to four Native American educators about what their students have been experiencing and the steps we need to take to help Native students and all of Arizona.

Serena Denetsosie is Deputy Associate Superintendent in the Office of Indian Education at the Arizona Department of Education.

Karen Francis-Begay is Assistant Vice Provost of Native American initiatives at the University of Arizona and serves on the Achieve60AZ board of directors.

Jim Larney is Director of the American Indian Institute at Mesa Community College.

Charles “Monty” Roessel is President of Diné College and serves on the Achieve60AZ board of directors.

What have been the main challenges you or educators in your community have faced as a result of COVID-19? How have you and your colleagues managed those challenges?

Serena Denetsosie: At the onset of the pandemic, we needed to take care of our Native American students by ensuring access to food and mental health resources. At the same time, there was the digital divide. Our teams at Arizona Department of Education came together really quickly to come up with a plan for our students. Our team immediately collaborated starting with ADE and federal food programs and moved on to other state agencies—collaboration we hope to continue on behalf of students.

Karen Francis-Begay: What has been really challenging is reaching students and making sure they're okay. The transition to online learning was quick and disruptive in so many ways. It was important to let our students know we were here for overall support and to remedy any issues so they could continue with their courses.

Jim Larney: The biggest challenge we faced was the disruption to our normal lives. Right in the middle of the semester, we had to shut down campus and turn everything

that we do to a remote style of learning, while still trying to meet the needs of our students.

Charles “Monty” Roessel: The first challenge was just putting everything online. An issue we faced was that our online learning platform did not support the Navajo language, so we had to quickly switch platforms. Once we did get everything online, we realized that too many students couldn’t access their classes due to a lack of broadband, data, or devices. Some of our professors uploaded lectures online, but watching one lecture would use up all of a student’s data and then they couldn’t access the next week’s materials. We had professors who provided instruction four different ways for students that had different issues with their technology. We provided open hotspots at our colleges to meet the needs across our community. Students not only from our college, but also from Arizona State University, University of New Mexico, and Harvard University, who were now at home, would drive to our hotspots and access their classes.

What are you talking about now that was previously not talked about in education?

What does this mean for the future of education?

Serena Denetsosie: We all know power structures and systemic inequalities have existed prior to this pandemic. We can’t ignore them any longer. What are we going to do in terms of holding each other accountable and working together for change? We have students from all different backgrounds relying on us, and so how do we learn from this going forward? It is important to have students who are in the education system at the table, so we can create sustainable change that works.

Karen Francis-Begay: My colleagues across the state and nation are having to come to grips with the fact that our Native students are definitely underserved. These students lack access to internet, running water and electricity in their homes, don’t have food

security, and are dealing with the pandemic with underfunded healthcare services. We need to take those issues into account and commit ourselves to doing all we can to support students who come to the university with their basic needs unmet.

Jim Larney: We can do everything remotely – moving everything to a remote style of learning, remote style of communicating. Now we can set up virtual meetings from anywhere, at any time; however, we lose that in-person touch that many Native students need by connecting with people face to face.

Charles “Monty” Roessel: The education community is talking about the opportunity this pandemic has forced upon us. I look at it more as a responsibility to all students. Because the pandemic is growing, our responsibility is not just to our students, but to other students as well. We owe our responsibility to the people — the students — that have passed as a result of COVID-19. Their dreams were cut short. How do we make sure that new students can be safe and continue to achieve their dreams? It's much larger than ourselves and it's much larger than the pandemic.

How do high schools and postsecondary institutions help current students prepare differently for graduation and work given a recession? How do you think a recession and unemployment will affect opportunities for adult education?

Serena Denetsosie: We have a tendency to overlook how often schools are centers for economic stability, and some of the largest employers in communities. So how do we work together to ensure our communities can thrive through education? By balancing Indigenous knowledge systems and Western ideology within our own communities and schools, children can thrive and become lifelong students who are successful at navigating tribal and community colleges, universities, or trade schools.

Karen Francis-Begay: There are learning opportunities and training for adults to learn a new skill and expand their professional portfolio. With classes online, there is an opportunity for people who are already in the workforce to take advantage of this. It may sound counterintuitive with many of the tribal communities having little to no access to the internet, but it also challenges the equity paradigm when students want to access and achieve an education without leaving their home community.

Jim Larney: One thing we've been doing to help our students prepare for entering the workforce is collaborating with the Career Services Department to hold live workshops on subjects like how to fill out applications or how to write a resume, and to hold mock interviews. I think there will be a shift to career technical education opportunities with our current state of affairs.

Charles "Monty" Roessel: College used to be about just learning a skill to get a job. But now, colleges need to be engaged in the economy of their communities. Colleges have a larger impact. This is uncharted territory when we look at how we plan for the future, so we have to plan with what we know.

What has been the role of the pandemic in highlighting educational inequities? What have been the biggest issues or challenges related to the education gap?

Serena Denetsosie: The pandemic exposed a number of inequities, from broadband challenges to cultural lens challenges and the way we come together for our students. This time has shown how we have to overcome the digital divide by educating on cultural literacy and meeting our communities where they are. This takes trust and flexibility. We will all grow from this pandemic and hope to continue to put in the vital work needed on behalf of our children.

Karen Francis-Begay: Our students are dealing with broadband capacity, financial challenges, and working from home while taking care of children, siblings, or elders at the same time. For many reasons, our students can't be 100 percent engaged in their coursework. Such issues and concerns have been elevated to university senior leadership and they are taking notice and are making it a priority to find ways to support Native students and the communities they come from — and that's a good thing.

Jim Larney: This pandemic has shown that the gap in access to technology is an equity issue. Some students don't have the necessary devices or internet at home to work, while other students are sharing one computer with their whole family.

Charles “Monty” Roessel: One of the biggest things we've been talking about is that everyone—students, faculty, staff, the community — needs access to quality mental health services. And for us, that also means access to our cultural health services so that we're able to access healing ceremonies. Beyond healthcare, we're wondering how we are going to increase graduation and retention rates when 30 percent of people on the reservation are worried more about washing their hands because they do not have running water.

Who is inspiring you in this challenging time and why?

Serena Denetsosie: This pandemic is hitting a lot of our elders in our tribal communities and the desperation and hopelessness is sometimes too overwhelming to acknowledge. But knowing our ancestors and tribal communities are resilient and have overcome a lot in history for us to be here today gives me hope. The sacredness of protecting our languages, our cultures, and our elders who are our knowledge holders is important for the future for Indigenous education.

Karen Francis-Begay: I am really inspired by our Native students. I'm hearing that some of our students are driving to Wi-Fi hotspots that are two hours away, sitting there and getting homework done, and then driving back home another two hours. That's a huge commitment from students, and it makes me want to do even more on their behalf.

Jim Larney: As a father, I am drawing my energy from my own children. Despite all of the setbacks and cancellations, my kids are just resilient. They are not letting this get them down.

Charles "Monty" Roessel: In the early days of the pandemic, we had a student who tested positive, went to the hospital, and then Zoomed into class from her hospital bed. The professor told her she really didn't need to do that, but she said, "I want to stay, I want to learn." Now, if that doesn't inspire you, I don't know what does. There are so many other stories of student resilience. This pandemic has forced us to listen to our students, to hear their voices because they matter, to hear their stories because they matter, and to hear and feel their hearts because they matter.

What do you think will be the best way for Arizona to Achieve60AZ given our new reality? What is your greatest hope for education coming out of COVID-19?

Serena Denetsosie: We as people all have some type of power and we need to exercise it. We need to walk the talk and put forth funding, change the system, create new policy. We need students, we need elders, we need all different people at the table. We need to acknowledge that the dominant society's way of doing things was set up for a certain group of people, and that hasn't worked for everyone. So, what will we do to change the power dynamics for children and communities so we can grow together?

Karen Francis-Begay: The best way to continue pushing toward our goal is to continue to advocate for students at the state and national levels, and to bring to light the

educational inequities that exist. My greatest hope coming out of this pandemic is that we see more investment in education across the board.

Jim Larney: What's the best way to reach our students? In order to achieve 60 percent attainment, we're going to need to be innovative, yet practical, in our way of thinking. Sometimes we're stepping over dollars to get a dime and forgetting about what we can actually do to reach our students. We need to start there.

Charles "Monty" Roessel: We need to change the way we view access to education. We look at K-12 as being a right, and then it stops there. So, if our goal is postsecondary attainment, we are running a 100-yard dash and stopping at 80. We need to finish the race. By doing so, we bring more in. And the more people you bring in, the bigger your circle gets. The bigger your circle gets, the more people you can bring in. That is how we achieve our goal.

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