

A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

By Kristen Munson

Shadows are just beginning to pull back across the mountains lining Sardine Canyon. Morning ends in Spanish Fork. The drive is nearly 500 miles across desert moonscapes and mesas washed out by the sun. Clusters of golden cottonwoods populate creek beds along the highway. In Blanding, the shadows start their slow creep across the mountains again. A mandate to educate the state means reaching out to the farthest corners of Utah where electricity is scarce, and running water, a luxury. The drive presses on.



TWO INSTITUTIONS UNITE

The Utah State University-College of Eastern Utah (USU Eastern) was created July 1, 2010 when the state legislature voted to develop a comprehensive regional college. The goal was to combine the strengths and resources of two institutions—Utah State and College of Eastern Utah—whose missions are to bring higher education to all classes of people. The merger provides the people of eastern Utah with greater access to four-year degrees. »



Bob McPherson outside his office on the San Juan Campus. The adobe bricks were handmade by students in the school parking lot.

USU-Eastern San Juan Campus has a longstanding history of educating Native American students.



Under the union, USU Eastern will continue offering technical education and professional programs such as nursing while USU will offer upper division coursework. The merger increases collaboration opportunities between faculty and students from both universities. The challenge is combining two distinctly different institutions with disparate histories and cultures.

Utah State has been the state's only land-grant university since 1888. Through extension services and branch campuses, the university touches all 29 counties. The College of Eastern Utah began as a two-year community college in 1938, with a main campus in Price and a satellite campus in Blanding.

"One of the things I love about a land grant institution is the tenet that intelligence is in the masses," said Guy Denton, vice chancellor for the San Juan Campus in Blanding. "That's why I am here. I really respect those principles. There is no ivy on our towers."

At the San Juan Campus, nearly 65 percent of the student body is Native American. Many are first generation college students. Many need remedial work due to limited instruction and resources on the reservations.

"We have an opportunity to take individuals from a completely different paradigm and help them see there is a way to change their lives," Denton said. "I think the merger with USU has brought

opportunity to this campus it hasn't seen in the past. But because we are small we can't get lost in the idea that we don't know anything—because we do."

A COMMUNITY SCHOOL

San Juan County is the only county in Utah with a minority-majority population. More than half of its residents are Native American.

In a 1973 report titled *San Juan County Navajos – Social and Economic Statistics*, 60 percent of Navajos were unemployed, 70 percent of families were living in poverty, 25 percent of homes had electricity, and less than 8 percent of students finished high school. No women attended college.

The school opened four years later in Blanding.

The original campus building shared space with a sewing factory. Classes, the library, and administrative offices were housed in mobile trailers. Much of what exists today was built on outside grants, said Virgil Caldwell, director of Distance Education and Program Development.

"The community wanted a college so they built one," he said. "It's kind of a pioneer attitude. Maybe it sounds like a cute or innocent view, but it sure worked."

Between 35 to 45 percent of classes are taught using a broadcast system. Their service area is 40,000 square-miles reaching into parts of Colorado and Arizona and on the Navajo Reservation—an area slightly bigger than West Virginia.

"For a lot of our students, driving 80 miles each way is an economic barrier to commuting," Caldwell said.

Distance learning enables students to attend school at nearby community centers where classes are broadcast live.

"Students can stay at home, stay connected to the land, and go to college," he said.

WALKING IN TWO WORLDS

The College of Humanities and Social Sciences added 18 new faculty members to its roster after the merger including Robert S. McPherson—an expert in Native American history and culture and the first full-time faculty member hired in Blanding.

McPherson is an Anglo from New England who moved to southeastern Utah 35 years ago. He is a story collector who works to preserve the history of the people of San Juan County. McPherson has authored 10 books, including the 2009 Utah Book Award winner. Local Native American populations often approach him about telling their stories. For instance, his most recent book *As If the Land Owned Us: An Ethnohistory of the White Mesa Utes* was written upon request.

"Somehow he has been able to walk in both worlds," said John C. Allen, dean of the college. "Not many people can do that."

McPherson sought to make Native American Studies a certificate program at USU Eastern four years ago. He partnered with Pam Miller, an associate professor of anthropology at the Price campus, to establish a program with tracts in Native American Studies, Museum Studies, and for cultural resource management that provide individuals with specialized knowledge about native populations they may interact with in the field.

The goal was also to recruit more Native American students to higher education, Miller said. "We wanted the students to have a broader view of what their life could be like. It's the role of the community college to ask, 'what does the community need?' The San Juan Campus has done a really good job finding out and responding."

She credits McPherson for getting the program off the ground.

"Bob really is the driving force behind this," Miller said. "He is still the heart and soul and vision of it."

McPherson saw the merger as an opportunity to expand it to all students and approached Dean Allen about getting more faculty members on board.

"To really make the program go, it has got to be in Logan, it has got to be in Regional Campus Distance Education," McPherson said. "If people can only catch the vision of what is down here—if they could see all the environmental, recreational, and cultural opportunities for study."

For example, McPherson recently collaborated with linguist Brian Stubbs on a project to capture the language and culture of White Mesa Utes—a group with only about 315 members left. Stubbs authored a dictionary to preserve the purest form of the Ute language.

"This is where the rubber hits the road in academia," McPherson said. "You are saving the language of a people who have been forgotten."

He believes a partnership with USU faculty and students will facilitate increased scholarship in areas like history, anthropology, social work and folklore. David Rich Lewis, a history professor on the Logan campus, is one of the Native American Studies program's earliest stakeholders.

Faculty members with expertise are scattered across the university from the humanities and arts to natural sciences, he said.

The aim was to develop an interdisciplinary program that brings them together.

"By establishing a certificate program it was the way we could responsibly explore demand before launching a formal program," Lewis said.

The hope is to generate enough interest to make Native American Studies a major and one day bring more Native American students to Logan.

"It's really difficult for a lot of native people to leave home and those networks of support," Lewis said. "One of the things we're struggling with is creating a support network for them to succeed [here.]"

Most classes in the program are taught remotely from the San Juan Campus. However, one requirement is participation in the field. This summer, McPherson will conduct an experiential learning trip to the Navajo Nation. The class will last three

weeks and immerse students in the life, history, and culture of the Navajo. It is the first time USU has offered anything quite like it.

FILLING A NEED

Karolyn Romero was a member of the first graduating class in Blanding. She now works there as a counselor and will attest to the importance of the Native American Studies program. Although it was not formally established when she was in school, she took the history and culture classes McPherson taught because it was information she never learned despite growing up on the Navajo reservation.

When Romero was 8 years old, her mother enrolled her in the Indian Student Placement Program—a foster program where Navajo parents placed their children in Mormon homes during the academic year so they could attend public schools. At the time, educational opportunities on the reservation were extremely limited.

"It was important for my mother to make sure her children got educated

because she never did," Romero said. "To me, it was one of the best things that ever happened."

The downside came when she moved back to the reservation after graduation.

"I didn't speak my own language. I had to learn it again," Romero said. "I had to learn more about where I come from."

She now advises her students to balance their identity at home with Anglo-American life. "Your culture should be appreciated," she tells them.

The Native American Studies program also benefits those who have lived away from the reservation, she said. "I think it is very important for the young people because they are still growing and learning. If [we] can get people educated, they will return and be the leaders. They are needed there."

Students like Amber Deal agree.

She grew up on the reservation. After graduating high school Deal went to college in Arizona, but left because she missed her family. It was just too far away.

"I wanted to come back and help my people but I didn't know how," she said. »

Karolyn Romero, a counselor on the San Juan Campus, is a member of its first graduating class.





Maranie Clah teaches computer literacy to elementary students on the Navajo reservation.

Her cousin encouraged her to enroll at USU Eastern. After taking one of McPherson's classes she found a new path.

"I learn a lot from him because I wasn't raised traditionally," she said. "His classes help me to understand my people more."

She carpools to the community center at Monument Valley where classes are broadcast live. Students write papers at the computer clusters. Infants sleep in car seats underfoot.

Deal once thought she would become a nurse to help care for the elders in her community. Her goal now is to earn her bachelor's degree in social work.

"People usually end up coming back to the reservation," she said. "Sometimes they come back because they have no place else to go. Some people come back to help. I want to do that."

ONE BIG OPPORTUNITY

McPherson's office is located on the periphery of the San Juan Campus, much where he prefers to be. He calls it Walden. The building is constructed of adobe bricks, handmade by students in the parking lot years ago. It was once used for storage. From

the doorway one can see Monument Valley in the distance.

McPherson prefers talking about other people at the school he describes as giving "150 percent heart." When the distance learning building on the reservation needed painting, staff and faculty drove out with paint brushes. When the main campus needed new grass, they were all out laying sod.

"I love this campus," he smiles.

While driving the 75 miles to Monument Valley McPherson points out various features in the landscape.

"There is a huge opportunity for teaching. This is a huge classroom," he said, gesturing to the mountain plateaus.

He pulls into the parking lot of Tse'Bii'Ndziszgaii Elementary School. He wants to speak with Maranie Clah—a recent graduate of the Native American Studies program and one of the school's newest hires. Nearly half of the school's teachers received their associates degrees from the San Juan Campus, McPherson said.

Clah grew up in Oljato, about 10 miles west of the elementary school along

the border of Arizona. "The middle of nowhere," he said.

He and his four siblings were raised by his grandmother after their mother died of breast cancer. Their father was an alcoholic who often wasn't home. They lived without electricity or running water. Still, Clah had high hopes for himself.

"I wanted to be an NBA player," he said. "But in middle school I realized I didn't actually play basketball. I began herding sheep."

He did it to get out of the house where he was free to sing traditional Navajo songs and his brothers would not tease him. He appreciated that his grandmother was raising him according to Navajo tradition, but understood his education was lacking.

"I never read a book until I was a freshman in high school," Clah said. "I realized I needed to study mathematics and writing."

In high school he connected with a teacher who saw his potential. Clah became a teenage dad and began to work at a gas station to support his wife and son. One afternoon his former teacher brought him to the San Juan Campus in Blanding, pointed

to a cluster of computers, and told him he was taking a placement test. He connected Clah with financial aid and helped with scholarship applications.

"I was not expecting that he was going to enroll me in college," Clah said. "Like Bob McPherson, this man pushed me and encouraged me."

The first day of school he was lost. He couldn't navigate the campus. Clah did not feel inspired.

"I took classes in everything," he said.

"None of them grew an interest in me until I took Bob's class *Native American Literature and Philosophy*. My whole being just got sucked into it."

Clah read and re-read the assigned readings.

"I just loved the books he picked out for us. I wasn't willing to dismiss one of his classes. I sat there and I paid attention," he said. "I like how he preserves our culture in his text book. He writes about the spiritual stuff. It makes it come alive to me."

He took all of McPherson's classes.

"I didn't have a male figure in my household," Clah said. "Somehow Bob filled that role. He kept pushing me to my limit. I am satisfied with this Native American Studies program. Not only did I earn a degree, it helped my spiritual being. It filled in these blanks that I should have learned from grandmother before she passed."

Looking around his community Clah sees people his age losing touch with their culture. Coming of age ceremonies for girls do not always happen. The money instead goes for bills, he said.

"It scares me. I wish more of my friends would learn the sacred songs," Clah said. "I wish they would learn how to pray."

He wants to continue with his schooling. He wants to become a professor one day.

"I want to be like Bob. I want to go out to people's homes and preserve their history—the history of the community, and of nature—I want to be a cultural anthropologist," he said. "I still can."

A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

McPherson has never met most of the students in Native Americans and the Environment class—at least not in person. Most are like Blake Thomas, '12, who attend class at one of four broadcast sites across the state.

Thomas, an Environmental Studies major, heard about the course from professors in the College of Natural Resources who knew he had a personal interest in the subject. From 2007 to 2009 Thomas served an LDS mission on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico.

"This class has been really great because it's been keeping me on my toes," he said. "It has made me dust off my old Navajo language workbooks and tapes to brush up on my skills. It has reawakened this desire."

While serving his mission, he found himself splitting wood for families and shuttling water to their hogans. Thomas formed a close friendship with a family who invited him for holidays and ceremonies.

"That's where I really learned a lot about their culture," he said. "They invited me in a casual way into their family."

His time on the reservation showed him the great reverence the Navajo people have for the land. However, a lack of resources contributed to some unsustainable practices on the reservation, Thomas said.

He wants to specialize in community-based conservation in graduate school and return to the reservation to serve in this capacity.

"There is so much to learn from native peoples," he said. "They have a voice and we need to hear it. I think this program has a lot of potential to expand and grow."

Dean Allen intends to do just that.

"When I looked at the Native American Studies program it was symbolic of the merger—bringing existing assets together and doing something at a higher level than what both of us have been doing," he said. "What I hope is to move it from a certificate to a BA, but that takes time. I would like to see a Native American teaching and learning center here in Logan."

Because the program is not taught in one department, Allen housed it in the Mountain West Center for Regional Studies where faculty and students from across disciplines can come together to research the Interior West, its land, history, and cultural groups.

"This program is really a model for interdisciplinary studies," he said. "This reaches not only across our departments, but across colleges. I think that is the model for the future." ■

NAVAJO SUMMER EXPERIENCE



Award-winning author Robert McPherson will lead a 12-credit hour course at USU Eastern's San Juan Campus designed to teach aspects of Navajo history and culture, arts, and mythology, through direct interaction with Navajo people. The Navajo Summer Experience program offered May 7–25 combines classes with field work and is ideal for teacher recertification, individuals who work in professions with Native American populations, or undergraduate students working towards their degrees.

The course involves traveling nearly 1,000 miles around the Four Corner region and participating in a one-day float trip down the San Juan River to study sacred Navajo geography. Successful completion earns one half of the credits needed for USU's new Native American Studies Program Certificate.

The total cost of the program is \$2,700. Enrollment is on a first-come, first-serve basis and ends April 16. To enroll, or if you have questions, contact Professor McPherson at bob.mcpherson@usu.edu or (435) 678-8140.