Written by Staff Report
Friday, 22 May 2015 15:20



TEMPE—On May 15, Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye spent the day in Tempe for several key meetings and scheduled convocations at Arizona State University.

Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President Policy Advisor Dr. Peterson Zah and Attorney General Ethel Branch joined President Begaye for the events.

Throughout the day, the common thread during the discussions was the need for educated Navajo professionals, especially CPAs, nurses and attorneys.

ASU Office of the President

The first meeting was with Michael Crow, ASU President. Because he was on travel, Crow sent representatives to the meeting.

The top management at the university provided an update on the collaboration with Navajo Head Start for the master's degree cohort program that was established to assist teachers with obtaining post-graduate level education.

President Begaye praised the program and said there were many Navajo leaders and students that were educated at ASU. He commended the creativity of ASU to implement the master's degree cohort program to assist the Navajo people with education.

“I’d like to see the school entertain some other aspects of education that you might help us with,” President Begaye said. “Such as the need for CPAs.

“I think we could incubate some Navajos in the financial field because there’s a huge need for us,” he added.

Branch said she worked for the ASU Center for Indian Education to establish a grant program at Rough Rock Community School.

“We were trying to revitalize the bilingual education program (at Rough Rock). I’ve watched ASU Law School really build its Indian Law Program,” Branch said. “You are helping us grow our own on our nation.”

The sentiment of appreciation for ASU was echoed by Sharon Singer, assistant superintendent for the Department of Dine’ Education. She said Navajo Head Start began working with the Mary Lou Fulton Teacher’s College two years ago.

“We have a master agreement that was actually initiated by former President Peterson Zah. Now we have three students who will be receiving their master’s degree in curriculum instruction and assessment with an emphasis on early childhood education,” Singer said.

One of the primary goals of the 2007 reauthorization of Navajo Head Start was to establish a highly qualified workforce. More than 50 percent of the staff obtained their bachelor’s degrees.

The ASU master’s degree cohort program provided classroom instruction on the Navajo Nation on the weekends.

“We found it to be very successful using the cohort model. We’re very excited to continue the partnership with ASU. It’s been a very good move for the nation,” Singer said.

Dr. Lamont Yazzie, director of educational services at Navajo Head Start, said it's a very exciting time for the Navajo Nation because of the ASU partnership.

Initiatives like the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Bureau of Indian Education restructuring and developing the Navajo Nation response plan to the common core are new opportunities for the tribe, he said.

"It's very exciting to be able to develop the foundation of all of this through Navajo Head Start. We're also infusing language and culture," Yazzie said.

ASU American Indian Convocation

There were 368 American Indian students that graduated from ASU in 2015. The ASU American Indian convocation was held at the Grady Gammage Memorial Auditorium.

President Begaye sat on stage and when introduced, was greeted by a roaring crowd. During the procession of students receiving their degrees, he shook hands with them and congratulated them on their educational achievement.

Toward the end of the ceremony, the tribal leaders on stage were allowed time to speak.

"I'm really honored today because we have so many graduates from the Navajo Nation," President Begaye said.

He spoke of the need for lawyers to litigate on behalf of the Navajo Nation to secure water rights and to prosecute all crimes that occur on tribal lands, including non-Navajos.

During the evening, President Begaye attended the Mary Lou Fulton Teacher's College convocation, which was held at the Wells Fargo Arena. There, he met Mary Lou Fulton, the namesake of the college and alumna.

Fulton met with the three Navajo students receiving their master's degrees and expressed happiness with the post-graduate initiative with the Navajo Nation and ASU.

Samantha Johnson works as a school readiness coach for NHS. She was excited to receive her master's degree.

"We want to continue and we want to get our doctoral," Johnson said.

Another graduate, Rolanda White, also worked for Navajo Head Start as a school readiness coach said she was thankful and happy.

"I'm very thankful for Ms. Singer and Dr. Yazzie. Thank you ASU for establishing the partnership and paving the way for us," White said.

Priscilla Shortman serves as a teacher for Navajo Head Start.

"This is exciting to practice what I'm learning in the classroom. Opportunities like this don't happen for a lot people and I am blessed because it's an education I can use and share with others," Shortman said.