

### NTU rolls out first tribal college, university accredited Ph.D program

Having Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint become the first Tribal College or University to receive accreditation for a Ph.D. program is a significant historical moment for higher education in the United States, especially for the state of New Mexico. This achievement represents a major step forward for both NTU and for Indigenous peoples who have historically been excluded from higher education.

This historical occasion is particularly important for the state of New Mexico, which has a significant Indigenous population. The recognition of NTU's Ph.D. program as a legitimate and respected academic program will not only benefit NTU and its students, but also contribute to the advancement of Indigenous education and leadership in New Mexico and beyond.

The program will begin in the fall semester of 2023.

Developed by Diné elders, The Doctor of Philosophy in Diné Culture and Language Sustainability has been created with a vision to promote cultural sustainability and language revitalization among the Navajo Nation and Indigenous. This paradigm-shifting doctoral program offers doctoral candidates training in the theory, practice, and research of Diné culture and language sustainability with the goal of championing the vitality and resilience of the Diné way of life.

This milestone represents a continuation of academic advances from NTU, which has a long tradition of commitment to celebrating, preserving and promoting the culture and language of the Diné people. The program aims to develop scholars equipped with skills to research, teach, and lead in the field of Diné culture and language sustainability.

"The Ph.D. program, Doctor of Philosophy in Diné Culture and Language Sustainability, is sacred to the Diné people," Henry Fowler, Navajo Tribe Medicine Man and Dean of Diné Studies at NTU, said. "Its sacred air will sustain the Diné people and the next generation in calling the four sacred mountains home using the Diné language and keep the Navajo culture flourishing."

Yazzie's words echo the observations of many scholars sympathetic to the absence of doctoral programs steeped in indigenous ways of knowing. To properly appreciate the significance of this Ph.D. program, it is essential to understand that Western-centric academic programs not only fail to serve Indigenous peoples, but in fact, inhibit the flourishing of Indigenous scholars.

"The Navajo Nation has a unique tradition of language and cultural scholarship conducted by Navajo people and by visitors from outside the Navajo Nation. The NTU program draws on this tradition of scholarship and on the wisdom of elders," Dr. Theodore Fernald, one of the founders of the Navajo Language Academy, linguist at Swarthmore College, and advisor to this program, explained. "It will be a place for a new generation of Navajo scholars to find their place in this tradition and shape its future".

Beyond the intrinsic, immaterial value of language, however, there are also more pragmatic, palpable considerations for a course focused on language revitalization and preservation. Given that global indigenous populations suffer from poor health outcomes compared with other racial and ethnic groups, the benefits of language initiatives represent a holistic method of contributing to improved wellbeing outcomes across multiple domains.

Elmer Guy, the President of NTU, firmly believes the program has the potential to positively and profoundly impact the future of Diné people.

"This is one way that we demonstrate our sovereignty," Guy said.

Guy acknowledged that the development of the Ph.D. program carried unique challenges, such as the recruitment of faculty uniquely qualified to teach in the program and conduct research in the field of Diné culture and language sustainability.

Nonetheless, on March 3, the collaborative efforts resulted in a robust Ph.D. Program that was just awarded accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.

## Historic moment for New Mexico

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This achievement is no mean feat: rather, it is the product of a rigorous process that ensures the program meets high academic standards and is recognized by other universities and academic institutions.

“We are proud to have received accreditation for this important program, which is a testament to our dedication to providing quality education and promoting Indigenous knowledge systems,” Fowler said.

The elders and scholars who helped develop the program have high hopes that its implications will reverberate positively throughout the Diné community as a whole, influencing workforce development and diversity in New Mexico and beyond. The cultivation of a new generation of Indigenous scholars equipped with both theoretical and practical skills will be uniquely poised to become leaders.

Dr. Franklin Sage, a Diné, the Chairperson of the Ph.D. program, and a leading scholar of Diné research in culture and history, explained what earning a Ph.D. means to Navajo people.

“For Navajo people, obtaining a Ph.D. is not just about personal success, but also about breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for future generations,” Sage said.

Dr. Siri Tuttle, a renowned linguist and expert in Athabaskan linguistics and community-based research, Professor and Chairperson of Diné Studies at NTU, explained the opportunities a Ph.D. would give Navajo people.

“Getting a Ph.D. means that a graduate can lead, conduct and publish research, with the NTU degree it is intended to go further: to indicate that the graduate can do all these things in an ethical way that also makes sense in the Diné world,” Tuttle said.

Dr. Wafa Hozien facilitated and supervised the development of the Ph.D. program alongside Tuttle and Sage, with Fowler and Drs. Robert Yazzie and Wesley Thomas, others at NTU, and in consultation with Diné elders throughout the U.S.

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The program's creators, in their awareness of the importance of acquiring validation of the thoroughness and quality of the doctoral degree, received Higher Learning Commission accreditation March 3.

"The faculty and staff look forward to welcoming our first cohort of students and training a new generation of scholars who can contribute to the betterment of Indigenous communities throughout the country," Guy said.

In addition to the academic benefits of the program, the accreditation of NTU's Ph.D. program has economic and social benefits for the state of New Mexico. Indigenous peoples contribute significantly to the cultural and economic vitality of the state, and by investing in their education and leadership, the state can continue to grow and thrive.

NTU is optimistic about the program and the diverse benefits it will usher in for students, the Navajo Nation, and Indigenous communities in general. A celebration of the establishment of the program will take place in April at NTU.

***Wafa Hozien, Ph.D. is a university administrator that collaborates to facilitate the creation of innovative accredited university programs throughout the United States. She can be reached @wafahozien on Twitter and Instagram.***



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