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The Diné Educational Philosophy (DEP) and its incorporation into the Associate of Science Degree Program in Public Health at Diné College

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Abstract
Diné College was established by an Act of the US Congress in 1968 as the first Native American tribally-controlled college. It is chartered by the Navajo Nation and operates eight campuses to serve a reservation community spread over 25,000 square miles. In 2004, Diné College became the first tribal college to establish a degree program in Public Health, and, in accordance with the college's mission, considerable efforts have been made to incorporate Navajo language and cultural materials into the teaching curriculum of this degree program. Materials are presented here that have been developed not only by Diné College but also by the Department of Diné Education (of the Navajo tribal government) and by the Northern Navajo Medical Center (Indian Health Service). These materials describe some of the core philosophical concepts, both in Navajo and in English, some of the complex symbolism associated with these core concepts, and some of the applications to daily living that derive from these core concepts. The purpose for the use of these materials in the curriculum is to ensure that students, who are almost all Navajo, will be prepared for providing Public Health educational and intervention services that are well suited to the cultural environment of the Navajo People.

Keywords: *Navajo, Native American, tribal college, cultural competence, public health, curriculum development*

Introduction

Public Health as a professional and academic discipline developed in a Western (European/Anglo-American) cultural context wherein problems were to be identified and measured, then solutions were to be devised so that the problems could be attacked – as in the ''war on cancer'' or ''war on poverty'' or ''war on drugs'' that have been part of the American political landscape in recent decades. In contrast to this approach, Diné College has focused on presenting a philosophy of Public Health that derives from traditional Navajo teachings (such as *hózhó* – balance).

Beginning with a Presidential Task Force that was appointed by the late Dean C. Jackson in January 1986, Diné College (''The Institution of Higher Education of the Navajo Nation'') has undertaken a long-term institutional endeavor to articulate a philosophy of education that would be firmly grounded in Diné (Navajo Indian) culture and which would inform and guide college-wide curriculum development and reform.

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Along with David Begay, Herbert Benally and Vivian Arviso, the present author was among the original four presidential appointees to this task force. Over time, the College has developed and adopted what is currently identified as the Diné Educational Philosophy or DEP.

The core philosophical concept around which the DEP is based is the statement *Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón* which is identified in the General Catalog of Diné College as describing "the Diné traditional living system, which places human life in harmony with the natural world and the universe. The philosophy provides principles both for protection from the imperfections in life and for the development of well-being".

There are four key words, each associated with a multitude of symbolic and interpretive values, which provide a practical framework around which all aspects of college life and function, including curriculum, are developed. These are:

nitsáhákees	– thinking, assessing	(associated with the East)
nahat'á	– planning	(associated with the South)
iiná	– living, implementation	(associated with the West)
sii hasin	– fulfillment, evaluation	(associated with the North)

The symbolism and values associated with these four words are exceedingly complex, such that no single graphic or representation is able to capture all of the relevant meanings. The most straightforward document that we have located which provides a strictly verbal interpretation of these four key words appears in Figure 1.

The Navajo Division of Education (which has since become the Department of Diné Education, comparable to a state department of education) has produced a graphic (see Figure 2) which provides a wide range of values and symbolism that is associated with each of these four key words, including the associations with the directions and thus the companion associations of the color of the sky and position of the sun seen in each direction, the sacred mountain located in each direction, and the stage of human life and development (physical, cognitive, social) associated with each direction. Note that the four key words appear in the central circle, surrounded by sacred feathers.

A related graphic (Figure 3) has been developed by the Health Promotion/Disease Prevention (HPDP) program staff at the US Indian Health Service hospital at Shiprock, New Mexico – the Northern Navajo Medical Center. From among the multitude of symbols and values presented in Figure 2, this graphic focuses on the directional (including color) symbolism and the stage of human life and development that is associated with each direction. This illustration represents just one example of the way that personnel in this program have integrated Navajo traditional concepts of wellness into their work, based on extensive consultation with Navajo elders.

The DEP program staff at Diné College, led by Jack C. Jackson, Sr., have produced yet another graphic (Figure 4) which is based on the traditional Navajo circular basket design, surrounded by the protective rainbow figure. Note that in all three of these graphic representations (Figures 2, 3 and 4), the East direction appears at the top, as that is the primary direction (the direction in which the sun rises) in Navajo and many other Native American cultures. The sacred mountains, each in the appropriate color, appear in Figure 4, along with the sun at the east and the moon at the west, and a series of footprints at the east as that is the direction in which a person enters and exits a *hooghan* (traditional Navajo dwelling) as well as all ceremonial procedures. The basket itself has its own multitude of symbolic representations, including color symbolism and a clockwise (*shábik'ehgo* – sunwise) direction of construction.

Ádił Hodílyin Oodáał

Protecting One's Self / Respecting One's Surroundings

Nitsáhákees – Thinking, reasoning, thought:
cognition, processes of the mind and mental activity.

1. **Baa nitsídzíkees.**
   Apply the techniques of reasoning.

2. **Nitsáhákees nahaaldeeł.**
   Analyze alternative solutions through the use of the principles of logic and creativity.

Nahat'á – Action, implementing thoughts, carrying out ideas:
ideas put into place.

1. **Nahat'á anitsékees bee yáti' dóó ííshjání óolzin.**
   Develop and demonstrate communication skills.

2. **Nahat'á nahaaldeeł.**
   Demonstrate systematic organizational skills.

Iiná – Achievement of outcomes, products, and solutions:
development of desired goals.

1. **"T'áá hó ájít'éego" as'ah oodáał.**
   Demonstrate self-direction based on personal values consistent with the moral standards of society.

2. **"T'áá hó ájít'éego" bózhǫ́ǫgo oonish.**
   Demonstrate quality in participation, work and materials.

Siihasin – Assurance, firm foundations, confidence, self-esteem:
critical evaluation of processes used for setting goals.

1. **Siihasingo oodáał.**
   Demonstrate competency.

2. **Siihasin nahaaldeeł.**
   Demonstrate confidence.

Figure 1. Description of four key words in Navajo philosophy: Nitsáhákees, Nahat'á, Iiná and Siihasin. (Reproduced with the permission of Diné College. All rights reserved.)

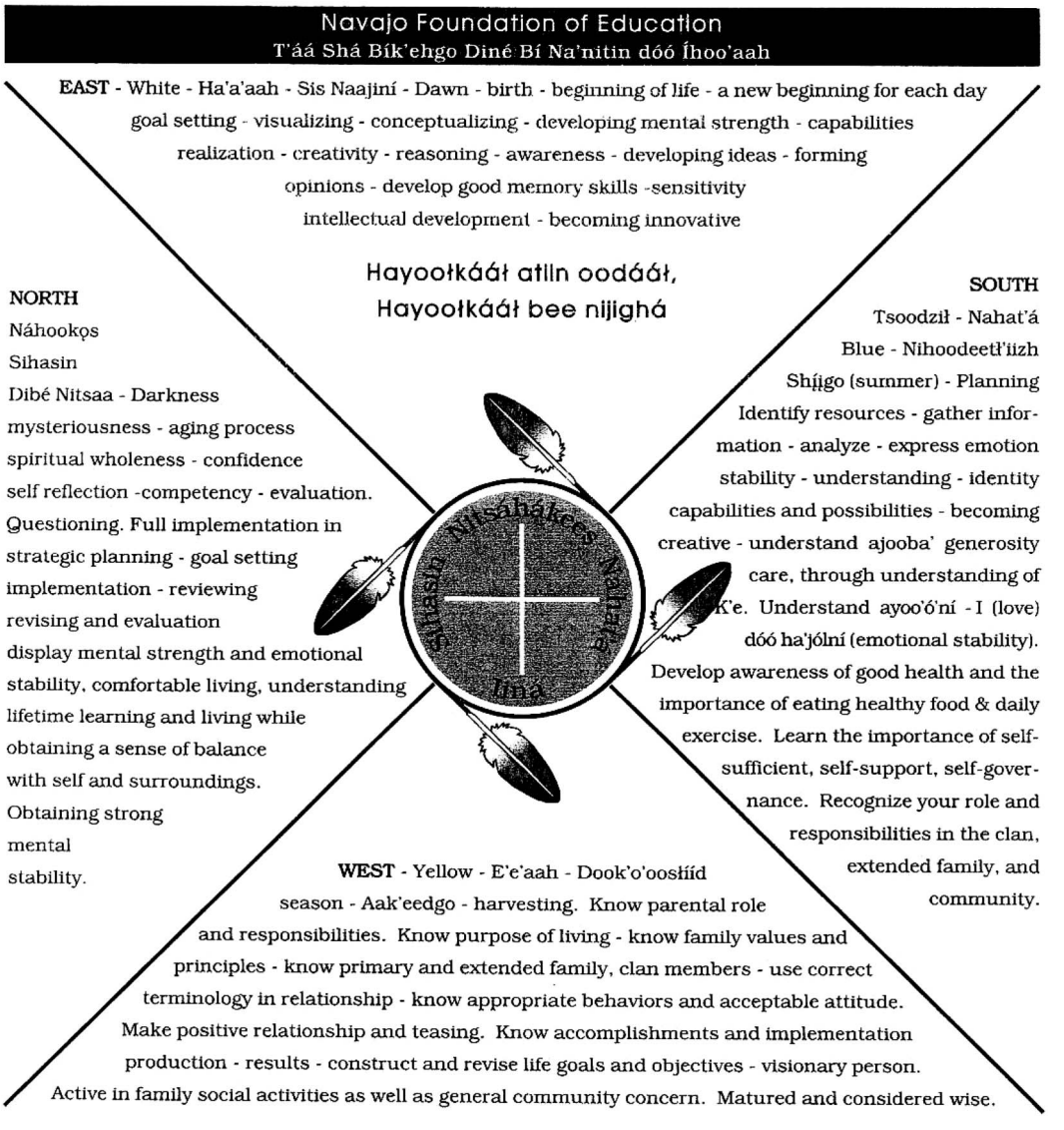

Figure 2. Navajo Foundation of Education, identifying concepts and symbols associated with the four key words described in Figure 1 (which appear in the circle at the center of this graphic). These include directional symbolism along with the associated colors of the sky, positions of the sun (time of day), sacred mountains, and stages of human life and development. (Reproduced with the permission of the Department of Diné Education, formerly the Navajo Division of Education. All rights reserved.)

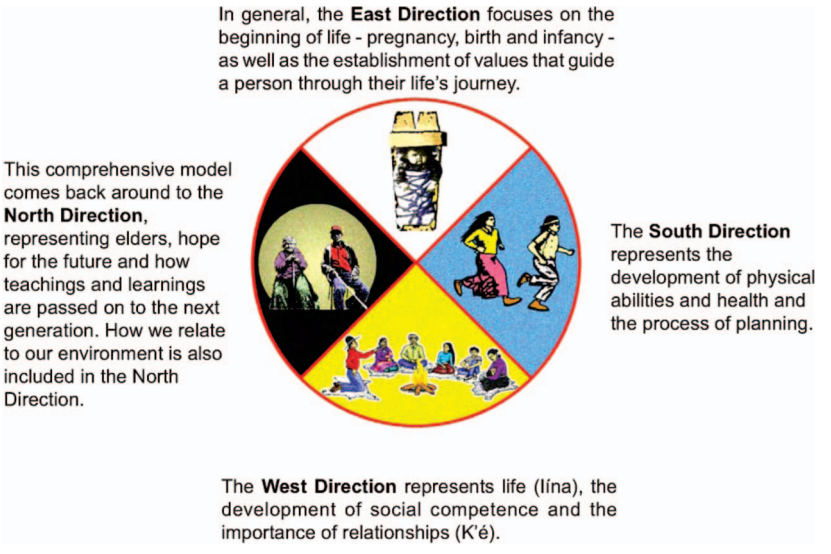

Figure 3. Directional and color symbolism as described in Figure 2, with emphasis on the associated stages of human physical, cognitive, social and moral development. (Reproduced with the permission of the Health Promotion/ Disease Prevention Program, Northern Navajo Medical Center, Shiprock, New Mexico. All rights reserved.)

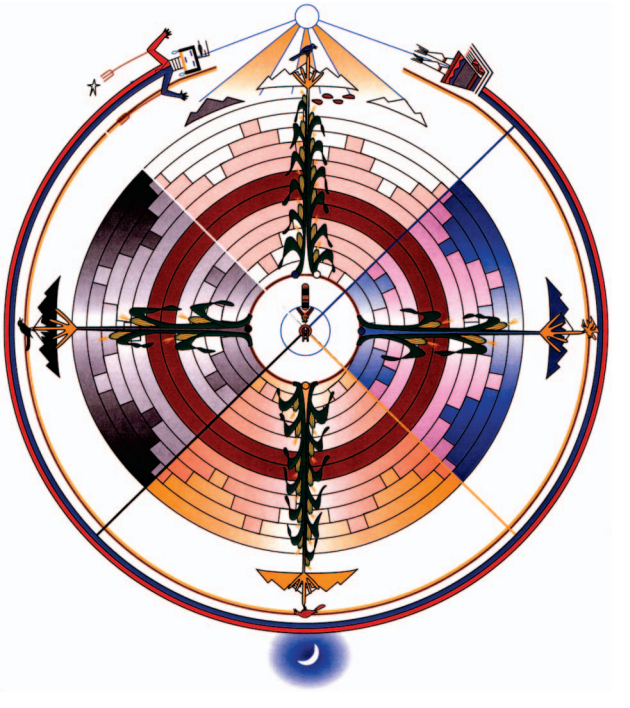

Figure 4. Diné College Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón Dual Education System. The four sacred mountains are shown, each in its appropriate directional color, along with the sun at the east and the moon at the west. Sacred corn plants are shown in each direction, and a fire at the center (as in the traditional dwelling, the hooghan). Footprints are shown at the east, which is the direction in which a persons enters and exits a hooghan. A sacred rainbow encircles and protects the entire representation. (Reproduced with the permission of Diné College. All rights reserved.)

Applications I: Course sequence and course content

After presenting and explicating the standard circle graphic which has long been used to represent the ''Three Core Functions'' (Assessment, Policy Development, Assurance) and ''Ten Essential Services'' of Public Health, we then present our students with Figure 5, which explicitly relates the key Navajo words *nitsáhákees*, *nahat'á*, *iiná* and *sii hasin* to this description of the discipline of Public Health. The ''fit'' is remarkably close as well as appropriate to both cultural contexts.

Diné College is the only one of approximately 36 tribal colleges and universities in the United States and Canada that has established a complete degree program in Public Health, and Diné College's program was formally approved and established only recently, in 2004. This Associate of Science degree program is presented in Figure 6. After the introductory PUH 111 course, the companion PUH 270 and PUH 280 courses form the heart of the degree program. PUH 270 is explicitly designed and presented in accordance with *nitsáhákees* and *nahat'á*, whereas PUH 280 is explicitly designed and presented in accordance with *iiná* and *sii hasin*.

It is well recognized that public health programs and services are more effective when they are responsive to and respectful of the culture in which they are to be implemented. Since most if not all of our students will most likely spend their lives and careers in the Navajo Nation, we provide them with a variety of supplemental materials and instruction intended to help them become more knowledgeable regarding Navajo terms and values relating to health and the individual. The ''Empowering Values of the Diné Individual'' (Figure 7), compiled collectively by several persons at Diné College and edited by Rex Lee Jim (more recently an elected member of the Navajo Nation Council, the legislative body of the Navajo Nation government) is one of these. Related to this are the ''Diné Teaching Examples'' (Figures 8) prepared by Martha A. Austin-Garrison of Diné College. These ''teaching examples'' are organized in accordance with *Sa'ah Naaghái*, which is associated with maleness and the ''Protection Way'' (*Naayéé'eek'ehgo*) path in life, and with *Bik'eh Hózhóón*, which is associated with femaleness and the ''Blessing Way'' (*Hózhóónjik'ehgo*) path in life.

Applications II: ''Asking questions'' with respect to the ''core functions'' and ''essential services'' in Public Health – Epidemiology

Epidemiology constitutes a significant part of the ''Core Function'' of ''Assessment'' and of the ''Essential Services'' of ''Monitor Health'' and ''Diagnose and Investigate'' in Public Health, as shown in the graphic that appears in Figure 5. Epidemiology is often described as the study of the determinants and distribution of diseases and illnesses in populations. The study of determinants (causes) rapidly approaches central concepts in Navajo and many other cultures. Etiology, the study of the causes of diseases and illnesses, reflects differences in cultures that often involve among the most difficult to understand of all novel cultural concepts. Since the ''Golden Age'' of public health (about 1880 to 1950), which was based on microbiology and the public health laboratory, the discipline of public health has been solidly founded on mechanistic and/or material causes of disease – bacteria, viruses, fungi, toxins, etc. Identification of causes of disease and illness may be substantially different in other cultures, especially traditional non-Western cultures such as that of the Navajo Indians. As potential future public health practitioners in the Navajo Nation, it is important that our students at Diné College understand these very different Navajo concepts relating to etiology.

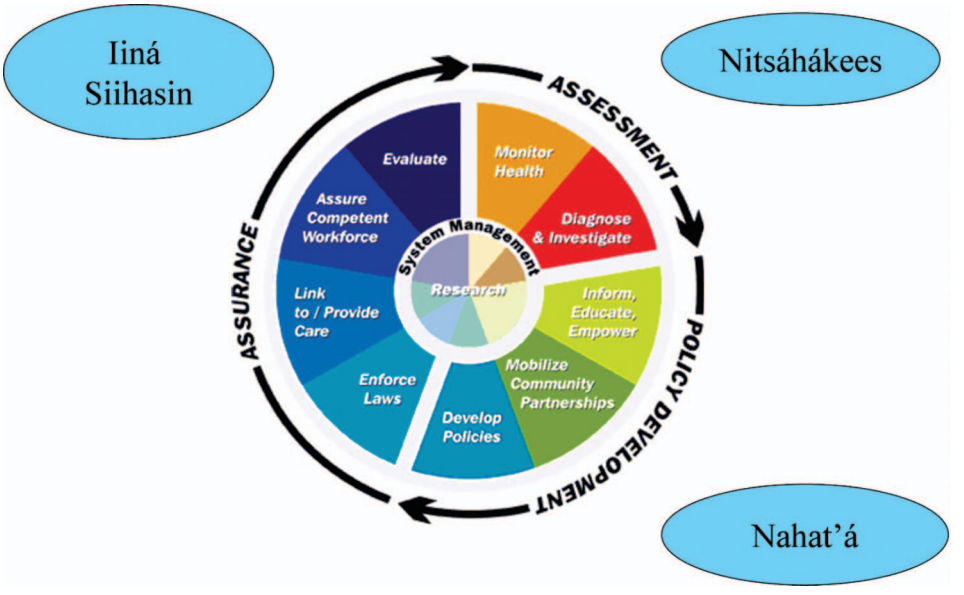

Figure 5. The four key words in Navajo philosophy (as described in Figures 1 and 2) as they may be associated with the three "Core Functions" (Assessment, Policy Development and Assurance) of Public Health and the "Ten Essential Services" of Public Health. (Reproduced with the permission of Diné College. All rights reserved.)

Epidemiological investigations involve the intensive *asking of questions* in an attempt to identify the determinants and distribution of diseases and illnesses, as mentioned above. The basic word relating to asking questions in Navajo is *na'ídíkid*, which means asking another person, or, in the case of diagnosing the cause of disease or illness, asking the Holy People (*Diyin Dine'é*). The Holy People are consulted for determining the causes and the remedies for any abnormal condition of the body or the mind. The basis for this goes back to legendary times, as stated in this example from a 1965 interview of a traditional practitioner in the Kayenta area of the Navajo Nation:

> *Hastóí baa hane'ígíí bee haz'áanii hóló.*
> "The elderly, their stories, there are laws for, in existence," or more freely "men, according to the legend, rules for the Navajo (have been placed in existence by the Holy People)".

There are a number of ways or methods for asking questions of the Holy People, but some of these ways have been seldom utilized in recent decades. The three most common ways of asking questions for diagnosis, still utilized by contemporary Navajos, are:

(1) Déest'íí' – Crystal gazing

Through *déest'íí'* or "crystal gazing" *tséghádi'nídínii bii'ji' adéest'íí'* "rock crystal, into it one looks".

This is most often done by the diagnostician holding a large quartz rock crystal and looking at a star through the crystal. The light from the star forms images or patterns in the crystal which the diagnostician is able to interpret. Some practitioners will sing or say a prayer before they use the crystal. If there is no crystal available, a bucket of water and a reflection of the moon are used on rare occasions.

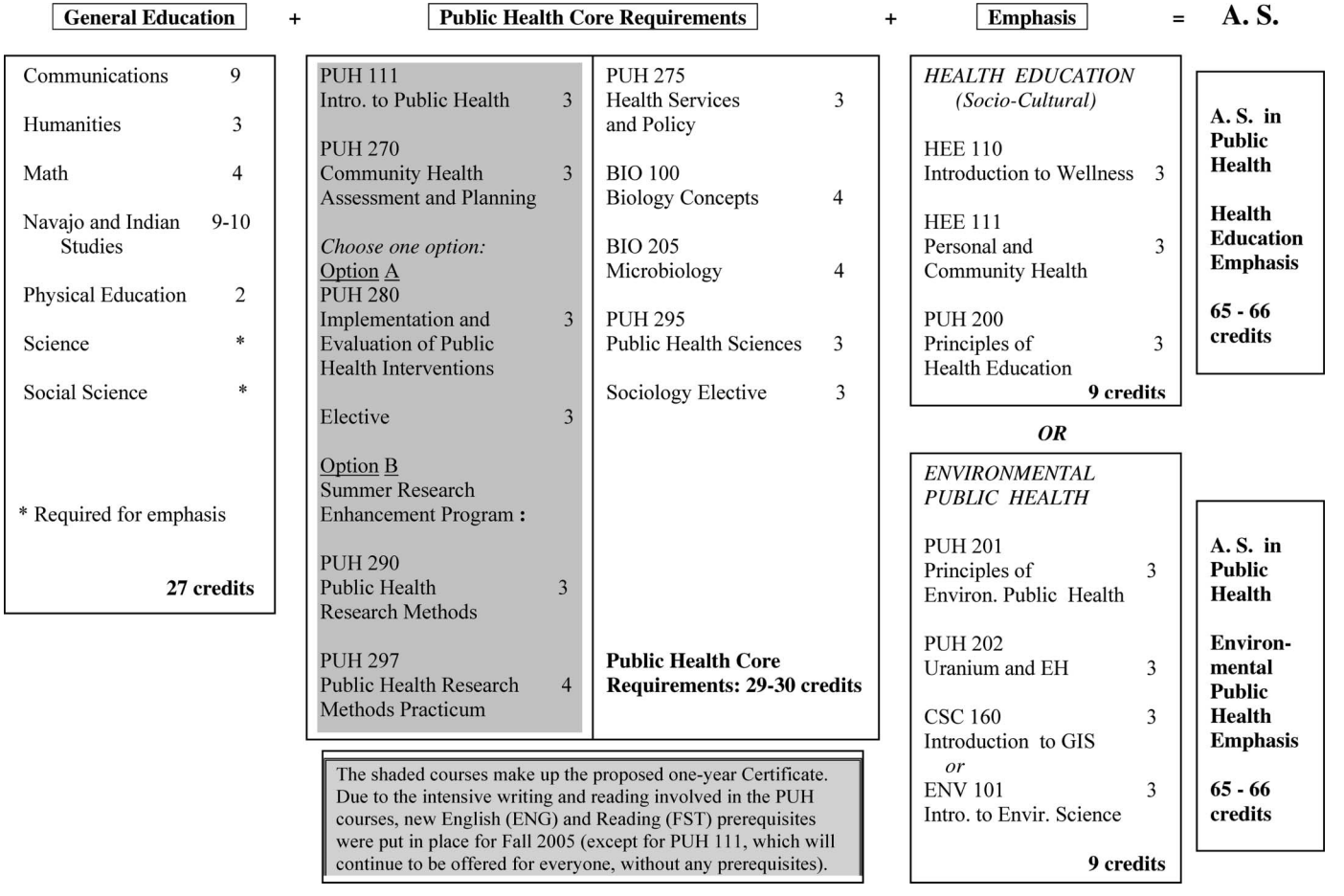

Figure 6. Associate of Science degree program in Public Health at Diné College, with a Health Education Emphasis and an Environmental Public Health Emphasis. (Reproduced with the permission of Diné College. All rights reserved.)

Empowering Values of the Diné Individual

Edited by Rex Lee Jim of Diné College, 03/20/96

1. Naayée'eek'ehgo Na'nitin
Protection Way Teachings

Doo hoł hóyée' da.
Never be fearful.

Doo ádahozhdeelá da.
Never be impatient.

Doo t'áadoo le'é bich'į' ni' jílį́ da.
Do not be hesitant.

Doo hánídziz'ą́ą da.
Never be easily hurt.

Doo ák'e'jidlíi da.
Never be overly emotional.

Doo ni' na'áhozhdiiltée da.
Do not be overly reluctant.

Doo adááh yájíłti' da.
Never be overly argumentative.

Dadílzinii jidísin.
Respect the sacred.

Doo t'áadoo le'é ádo'ájílnéeh da.
Do not overburden the self.

Ázhdíłtł'is.
Have self discipline and be prepared for challenges.

Na'ádizhnitaah.
Assert the potential.

Doo yázhnízin da.
Do not be shy.

Doo nijichxǫ' da.
Do not get mad.

Doo ách'į' ni'jódlíi da.
Do not carry around expectations of negative circumstances.

Figure 7. Empowering values of the Diné individual, compiled at Diné College in 1996 by a group coordinated by Rex Lee Jim. The complementary Protection Way teachings and Blessing Way teachings "provide principles both for the protection from the imperfections in life and for the development of well-being", as described in the *General Catalog* of Diné College. (Reproduced with the permission of Diné College. All rights reserved.)

2. Hózhǫ́ǫjík'ehgo Na'nitin
Blessing Way Teachings

Há áhwiiníť'į.
Be generous and kind.

K'ézhnídzin.
Acknowledge and respect kinship and clanship.

Hane'zhdindzin.
Seek traditional knowledge and traditions.

Hoł íłį.
Respect values.

Ádá hozhdílzin.
Respect the sacred nature of the self.

Hazaad baa áhojilyą́.
Have reverence and care of speech.

Hazhó'ó ajíists'ą́ą́'
Be a careful listener.

Ahéé'h jinízin.
Be appreciative and thankful.

Hanitsékees k'ézdongo ájósin.
Have a balanced perspective and mind.

Há hózhǫ́.
Show positive feelings toward others.

Dloh hodichí yá'át'éhígíí hazhó'ó bee yájíłti'.
Expression of appropriate and proper sense of humor.

Ádił jídłį.
Maintain strong reverence of the self.

Hanaanish ájíł'íinii bízhneedlį.
Maintain enthusiasm and motivation for one's work.

Hanaanish baa hą́ą́h jinízin.
Protect and care for one's work.

Figure 7. (*Continued*).

Diné Philosophy of Learning
Sa'ąh Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón

Edited by Martha A. Austin-Garrison

Sa'ąh Naagháí Long Life

Male
Protection Way teachings may include the following:

Diné Teaching Examples

Díí doo ájíł'į́į da	Things you do not do
Tsi'nijigháa da	living a reckless life
Ajidlą́	drinking
Azhdiłdił	playing gambling sticks
Azhdilé	adultery
Hánídziz'ą́	easily hurt
Diné bíjółnííh	suspicious, jealous of other people
Jééhdziztį́	jealous rage
Hoyooch'iid	a liar
T'áá ádzaagóó hojilne'	telling false stories
Ha'át'e' hólǫ́	rough manners
T'áá ałtsoní ák'ihizhdiit'aah	paranoid
Nijilteeh	stubborn
Hoł hóyéé'	being lazy
Kéyah doo bąąh hą́ą́h jinízin da	not respecting Mother Earth
Naaldlooshii doo hoł nilį́į da	not respecting animals
Dahodiyingóó doo hozhdlisin da	not caring for sacred places
Hodine'é doo bá jiztį́į da	not being a leader for your own people
Ha'áłchíní, hak'éí doo baa áhojilyą́ą da	not caring for your children and relatives
Doo ádá nitsíjíkees da	not thinking for oneself
Doo ádaa áhojilyą́ą da	not caring for oneself
Haghan doo baa áhojilyą́ą da	not having a good home

If you do the things you are told not to do, then you will encounter all the negative forces.

In order to live a long life, you should live a good life, be respectful of all living things around you, and remember the lessons from your elders and your teachers.

Figure 8. Diné Teaching Examples that derive from the Diné Philosophy of Learning, associated with the Protection Way teachings and Blessing Way teachings as described in Figure 7. Compiled at Diné College by Martha A. Austin-Garrison. (Reproduced with the permission of Diné College. All rights reserved.)

Bik'eh Hózhóón **Beautiful harmonious life**
Being blessed with all things

Female
Blessing Way teachings may include the following:

Diné Teaching Examples

Iiná dah yilyéél	holding a good life
Yá'át'éehgo nitsáhákees	good thoughts
Yá'át'éehgo na'adá	good behavior
Ha'álchíní bá jiz[	being there for your children
Hal[[' baa áhojily[	caring for your livestock
Hodine'é hak'éí bá jiz[	being a leader for your people/kin
Kéyah hoł íl[	respect Mother Earth
Dahodiyingóó hozhdísin	respect all sacred places
Doo t'áá ádzaagóó yájíłti' da	do not talk with abusive language
Doo azhdika' da	not playing cards
Doo adziidz[[da	not beating spouse
Doo diné binahojigiz da	not tricking other people
Doo hoł hatso da	not being greedy
Hoł hózh[	being happy
Há áhwiinít'[	being generous, helpful
K'é jinízin	being thankful
Diné bíká'anl[ílwo'	helping other people
Ahéeh jinízin	friendly
Ayóó'ó'óní	loving
Jijooba'	being merciful
Diné t'áá ałtso hoł nil[	thinking highly of all people
Hohónéedz[	being admired for one's behavior
Hadááh íní	being admired
Yá'át'éehgo hazaad hól[	having good language/speech

If you do the wonderful things you are told to do, then you will live a good life.

In order to live a good life, you need to respect all living things around you, and remember the lessons from your elders and your teachers about the good teachings.

Figure 8. (*Continued*).

(2) Tiníléí – Hand trembler

The most popular method for asking questions (in diagnosis) is the use of *tiníléí* ''hand trembler'', also known as *ni'dilniih* ''hand trembling method''.

Ni'dilniihjí used in a ceremony. A gila monster (reptile native to the American Southwest) is the messenger.

The practitioners use their hands and, with intense concentration, they can tell what is affecting the person and what needs to be done. With the diagnostician in a trance-like state, he or she receives knowledge conveyed by the gila monster from the Holy People, while the diagnostician's hand may make markings or pictures in the sand that symbolize the cause for the condition that is the subject of the inquiry.

(3) Íists'áá' – Listening

''Listening'', *íists'áá'* use of listening diagnosis. This is rarely used anymore. In the use of ''talking corn stalk'' *K'eet'áán Yálhti'* and the ''talking feathers'' *Ats'os Halne'í* , prayers are offered before using the corn stalk and the talking feathers.

In each of these methods of asking questions in order to secure a diagnosis, the diagnostician (the ''hand trembler'' or ''crystal gazer'' or ''listener'') is a traditional specialist (typically born with the gift, as it is not something that can be intentionally learned), who is engaged (for compensation) by the patient specifically for that single question-asking session. The diagnostician becomes the medium through which the patient is able to ask the Holy People regarding the correct cause and nature of the illness as well as the most appropriate treatment. In certain circumstances, a person may engage a diagnostician on behalf of someone else (such as a close relative), but the diagnosis is typically directed toward the disease or condition that is afflicting a single person (or perhaps a family or extended family). In rare circumstances, a diagnostician may be consulted on behalf of the entire Navajo population, such as during conditions of pervasive drought or unusual epidemics (such as with the Hantavirus and West Nile Virus outbreaks of recent decades).

Applications III: Naayéé' Ádaanída'oozkan – The ''little monsters'' who begged to live

One of the very early series of events of Navajo history involves the Hero Twins, who were provided with weapons by their father, the Sun, with which they killed the various monsters that had been killing people and making the Earth unsafe for human habitation.

After they had finished killing all of the terrible monsters, the Hero Twins discovered 12 additional ''little monsters'' and prepared to kill them also. However, each of these ''little monsters'' pleaded for his continued existence and presented a convincing argument as to why he should be allowed to remain alive on Earth. The Hero Twins were persuaded by their arguments, and each of these ''little monsters'' was allowed to live on. They are:

Dichin Hastiin	Hunger Man
Té'é'í Hastiin	Poverty Man
Bilh Hastiin	Sleep – Lazy – Procrastinator Man
Yaa' Hastiin	Lice Man
Sá Hastiin	Old Age Man

Dibáá' Hastiin	Thirst Man
Dich'á Hastiin	Mutton Hunger Man
Yíní Hastiin	Depression – Worries – Emotional Illness Man
Dikos Hastiin	Common Cold Man
Lhóód Hastiin	Sores Man
Ts'íihniidóóh Hastiin	Disease Man
Tidílht'é Hastiin	Injury Man

The cultural logic employed by these ''little monsters'' was vastly different from the approach familiar to anyone raised in contemporary ''white'' culture. Each provides an illuminating glimpse into the rational logic of a very different culture. For example, the argument of *Dikos Hastiin*, Common Cold Man, was as follows:

> Don't kill me. You will make use of me in the future. When you get a cold, you will say 'I got a gift – *sha'nídéél*'. The gift that you will get from me is that I will enter your body and I will clean your insides, bringing out the bad stuff that has been accumulating over a period of time. I will make you sweat, vomit, and make you have diarrhea. When you get a cold, you will go into a sweat lodge, drink some strong herbal tea and you will sweat. You will come out of the sweat ledge four times, and each time you will drink the herbal tea. You will then vomit all the bad things from your body. And when you sweat you will get rid of the bad stuff through your skin. The herbal tea will give you diarrhea and it will get rid of stuff through your stool. In four days I will clean your body. You will be a new person in four days. But if you use other medicines that were not created for the people (such as the White Man's medicine) then I will just have a big fight inside your body. I will stay with you longer (two weeks to a month). Using the sweat lodge and herbal tea (sage, juniper, and other herbs) will help me get rid of all the bad things that had accumulated for a period of time.

The other ''little monsters'' all presented similarly engaging and convincing arguments as to why each should be allowed to continue to live. These events are considered actual historical episodes in early Navajo history. Many of our students at Diné College may have heard partial or limited descriptions of the events involving these ''little monsters'' and the reasons why they are still with us today, but the unique cultural roles of these ''little monsters,'' and the logic employed by each, are easily lost or glossed over in a context of rapid cultural change and assimilation. We believe that it is important for our Public Health students to be knowledgeable in this regard – especially so that, in their future Public Health work among the Navajo People, they will be able to more fully understand the cultural logic of those Navajos (especially the elderly) with whom they are interacting, and thereby will be prepared to be more effective in their health education and public health intervention work.

In any culture, a relatively small proportion of the population is routinely engaged in philosophical deliberations and in achieving deeper understanding of important cultural concepts and symbols. These are the ''philosophers'' and ''theologians'' whom the rest of the society looks up to for intellectual insight and guidance. Some of our students at Diné College have had the opportunity to engage in philosophical discussions with others (typically older relatives) on such topics as the four key words that are associated with the cardinal directions, or with the practice of ''asking questions'' and the rationale that supports that ''way of knowing'', or with the ''little monsters'' and the logic that applies to their cases, but these are increasingly becoming the minority among our students.

Nevertheless, virtually all of our students have picked up enough of the cultural knowledge which provides the basis for Navajo society that they can achieve some degree of personal integration of this cultural information, within the academic framework in which our Public Health program is structured. This is not an easy or trivial task. The classroom presentations on cultural information are provided by Navajo staff and faculty of Diné College, and the presentations invariably generate considerable discussion. In the final analysis, it is up to the individual student to apprehend how to integrate this cultural knowledge into his or her own Public Health practice.

Conclusion

As a tribal college, Diné College has a unique responsibility to the Navajo Nation Government, which charters and supports the institution, and that responsibility includes sustaining the vitality of the language and culture of the Navajo People. In our Associate of Science degree program in Public Health at Diné College, the Diné Educational Philosophy provides the framework that has guided the development of the degree program as well as the content of the individual courses that make up that degree program.

Our students are almost all Navajos, and our expectation is that their education in Public Health at Diné College will be utilized in their future roles as public health providers among the Navajo People, or as family and community members even if they do not become public health providers. An informed understanding of relevant cultural knowledge and cultural philosophy will surely aid them in being more effective in those roles.

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