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Creating Positive Partnerships for Agricultural Programs Within Native Nations in Oklahoma

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Abstract

This research looks at the agricultural systems of four Oklahoma-based Native nations and the College of the Muscogee Nation, while looking at how partnerships impact the development of these programs.

Keywords: Native nation agriculture, Indigenous leaders, agricultural leaders

Every Native nation has uniquely different histories as they moved throughout the continent and settled to their present day location. After European colonization, there was a movement to assimilate Indigenous peoples through allotment. Allotment was a significant part of this move to assimilate and was also thought to provide a “sense of ownership” (Hurt, 1987, p. 136) of the land to further situate Native Americans to become self-sufficient through agriculture. Ultimately, the Europeans viewed allotment and agriculture as solutions to make Native Americans civilized (Burns, 2004; Hurt, 1987; Lomawaima, 1999; Lomawaima & Ostler, 2018), which also created disruptions in their worldviews as it relates to relationships with land and resources.

Further, some Indigenous peoples recognized how allotment and the push for Eurocentric agriculture was evolving around them, and how these actions could either destroy their community or it could be embraced and be re-imagined to create a new Indigenous specific reality. These Indigenous peoples realized they “would have to change if the community were not to be splintered by the forces of this extraordinary time” (Iverson, 1995, p. 2). It was at this time that many Indigenous peoples took the European agricultural methods and modified them to fit their unique Indigenous place-based contexts. Whether nations were farming or ranching, they were engaged with agriculture and their community. Despite the extensive and complex history of agricultural and educational systems within the United States, Indigenous peoples maintained highly developed agricultural systems prior to colonization. After colonization, Indigenous and European systems converged in a battle of power that lasted for centuries.

Today, there are 573 federally recognized Native nations in the United States and 39 federally recognized Native nations within the state of Oklahoma. The agricultural history of each tribe is unique and European influence is found throughout. Indigenous peoples have historically been engaged with agriculture and have continued to maintain those practices. As agricultural practices are passed down generationally, there is an inevitable educational component. This research focuses on the agricultural systems and educational programs of four Oklahoma-based Native nations: the Choctaw Nation, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Osage Nation, and Quapaw Nation. Additionally, the study looks at educational opportunities created by the College of the Muscogee Nation. This study seeks to understand the histories of these five settings related to the development of agriculture, specifically as it relates to agricultural education.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks that guide this study are TribalCrit and Osage ribbon work. TribalCrit seeks to address the complicated space of Indigenous peoples within a European colonial society (Brayboy, 2005; Pewewardy, Lees & Clark-Shim, 2018). TribalCrit also contends that colonialism is endemic to society and the importance of looking at Indigenous peoples as both a cultural group and as sovereign nations (Pewewardy, Lees & Clark-Shim, 2018). In addition to TribalCrit, Osage ribbon work seeks to take European educational systems that were forced upon Indigenous peoples and rework and reframe those systems to be uniquely Osage (Hayman, RedCorn, Zacharakis, 2018; RedCorn, 2016; RedCorn, in press). Using TribalCrit and Osage ribbon work as the theoretical frameworks, this multiple-case study seeks to understand the complex entanglements that not only existed historically, but currently exist in respect to the development of Indigenous specific agricultural education programs.

Theme – Partnerships are Very Important

After the data collection and analysis, one theme that emerged from the study is related to the importance of partnerships. The theme of *Partnerships are very important* is a direct quote from the Choctaw Nation and spans across all cases. Each of the Native nations and the College of the Muscogee Nation acknowledges the importance of working with other organizations for the benefit of their respective nation. It appears each case has sometimes been a winding road as challenges associated with creating and developing programs are navigated. Today, each case has created highly successful programs that are situated to utilize the partnerships that have been established to continue the work that has begun. The importance of partnerships are explored within each case.

Quapaw Nation

From the beginning, it is apparent that partnerships are important to the Quapaw Nation. The organizations the Quapaw Nation frequently engage are the University of Arkansas Food and Agriculture Initiative, the Intertribal Agriculture Council, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, and other universities. These organizations bring an important component to move the Quapaw Nation forward. These agriculture organizations bring opportunities for the Quapaw Nation, both for agriculture and agricultural education. In addition to collaborative opportunities with other organizations, these collaborations brought recognition to the Quapaw Nation for their work. While conferences are a great way to interact with other organizations and nations throughout the United States, it is also an opportunity to showcase the work being performed. A positive moment is created when the Quapaw Nation's administration sees the program recognized at a national conference.

In addition to the resources universities bring to the Quapaw Nation, there exist collaborative opportunities within these partnerships. In terms of agricultural education, the Quapaw Nation did not limit interns to be solely Quapaw students. Roper describes this limitation of the availability of Quapaw students:

We had very few kids that were Quapaw students that were interested in agriculture. Ironically, about two years ago, I went to Dartmouth and did a food summit for some students that I met through the Indigenous Food and Agricultural Initiative summit. They were Blackfeet students that invited me and I ran across a Quapaw student while I was

there...Throughout the years, I think I only had one Quapaw intern. (Personal communication, November 20, 2020)

While Quapaw students were sought, any student was welcome to learn from the Quapaw Nation's agriculture programs. If students are learning from the Quapaw Nation's agriculture programs, they are also learning about the greater Indigenous initiatives.

For the Quapaw Nation, partnerships are an essential component to the success of the agricultural education program. Partnerships within the nation are important to facilitate interns learning the diverse aspects of agriculture. Additionally, partnerships with universities and other organizations provide learning opportunities for Indigenous youth. Ultimately, through partnerships and resources those partnerships provide, the Quapaw Nation can better create an agricultural foundation to support their youth.

Muscogee (Creek) Nation

For the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, partnerships are vital to the success of the agricultural education program. The Intertribal Agriculture Council is a positive partnership to bring opportunities to engage their youth. While the Intertribal Agriculture Council plays an important role, the Johnson O'Malley program has also been vital. The Johnson O'Malley (JOM) program is administered by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs and supports eligible Indigenous students that attend public school systems (United States Department of the Interior, n.d.). For the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, JOM plays an important role in reaching the Nation's youth. Haltom further describes the importance of JOM in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's program:

I have gotten involved in the JOM part of it the last couple years and that's really helped identify those kids. The JOM programs, through the high school, have really helped me identify the kids that were basically underserved. And whenever we get those kids who are underserved, and we have a lot of kids who don't have ag teachers or don't have a parent or an Extension leader and that's my role. (Personal communication, December 15, 2020)

As in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, being strategic in partnering with organizations has a positive effect on how the program progresses. In this instance, the JOM helps the Muscogee (Creek) Nation reach youth that are underserved.

In addition to the JOM program within the public schools, the agriculture teachers are another resource available to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. The agriculture teachers work closely alongside youth and through that, there is an established rapport with youth and their families. The agriculture teachers provide support to students in the local school systems, while the Muscogee (Creek) Nation works hand-in-hand with the teachers. The jurisdiction of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation is eight counties, so it can be difficult to reach all students in that area. Through partnerships with the local agriculture teachers, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation can better reach their youth.

Ultimately, partnerships are an essential component in agricultural education programs for the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Haltom utilizes the capacities of organizational partnerships to better facilitate the existing program and engage Indigenous youth. For the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, the Intertribal Agriculture Council, local agriculture teachers, and the JOM program play a significant role in meeting the overall program goals.

Osage Nation

For the Osage Nation, partnerships are essential in the development of agriculture and agricultural education initiatives. The Intertribal Agriculture Council is an important partnership for the Osage Nation. This relationship is especially important in working with the Osage Nation's agriculture programs, while also further developing coordination between government organizations and Native nations. Red Corn explains the positive relationship the Osage Nation has with the Intertribal Agriculture Council:

We all sat down and were very honest with each other, the reps from USDA and the nine people that are on this RTCAC committee and we had a long talk about what this is...And then, I put forward and it was adopted, an idea that we can't improve what we can't measure. So, we started, we spent that meeting quantifying or agreeing that we needed to figure out how to quantify that delivery of service. From NRCS to the different tribes...So at a very high level, actually it's about as high level as you can get, there's a concerted effort to improve only that dialogue, but improve the method by which we evaluate that delivery of service. (Personal communication, February 24, 2021)

In light of these efforts, the Osage Nation is working through partnerships to ensure outside organizations are meeting the needs of Indigenous communities. The Osage Nation has a seat at the table to be part of these conversations to better serve their tribal agriculture programs.

Another partnership that is important to the Osage Nation is cultural knowledge within the Osage community. For the Osage Nation, this is an essential component to agricultural education and facilitating the relationships with the cultural knowledgebase is imperative. Red Corn expressed the importance of the cultural component and the concern of this knowledge being within a few individuals by saying, "Other than the people, the five or six people that participated in that dried corn [training] out there, the demo that we did, there's no one else that knows how to do that" (Personal communication, February 24, 2021). With this knowledgebase currently only existing with a few individuals, the partnerships with the cultural community is extraordinarily important for the cultural agricultural education component to carry forward. As the cultural knowledgebase is held within the Osage community, it is important for agricultural programs implemented by the Osage Nation to actively engage these knowledges to create meaningful educational opportunities to ensure this knowledge continues to be taught.

In regards to partnerships, the Osage Nation value people and organizations that help the agriculture and agricultural education programs. While it is important for the Osage Nation to have a seat at the table for higher level programmatic conversations, it is also valuable to have positive partnerships in place locally to meet the goals of the Native nation.

Choctaw Nation

Partnerships are an important component for the success of the Choctaw Nation's agricultural education programs. To begin, the livestock show is a successful agricultural education program, but it requires a lot of support. The livestock shows are held the same weekend in two locations. While there are challenges associated with two livestock shows occurring at the same time, partnerships with other organizations make it a success. House describes this by saying, "Putting on two livestock shows that's going on simultaneously that's two hours away from each other. I can only humanly possibly be at one. If it wasn't for my ag teaching buddies and my Extension buddies, you know what I mean. I can't get it done" (Personal communication, May 12, 2021). The partnerships built with the local agriculture

teachers and Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service brings people to the table to best facilitate programs that are important to the Choctaw Nation youth, such as the livestock show.

In addition to assisting with events, partnerships support agriculture initiatives for the benefit of Choctaw Nation constituents. The Choctaw Nation coordinates with organizations, such as the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, and Natural Resource Conservation Service. Some of the educational topics developed through these partnerships include soil health, feral hogs, beekeeping, hoop house construction, sprayer calibrations, and gardening. Relationships with other federal programs further Choctaw Nation agriculture by ensuring constituents receive the help needed from the appropriate organization. House provides an example by stating, "I'm usually like, 'You need to get ahold of your local USDA office. That doesn't, at the moment, have anything to do with the tribe.' So, my point in saying all that is that you know, partnerships are very important" (Personal communication, May 12, 2021). The Choctaw Nation, in cooperation with other organizations, want to see Choctaw Nation constituents connect to the program that best meets the needs. In order to do that, partnerships are established to facilitate the Choctaw Nation's needs.

For the Choctaw Nation, partnerships are essential in implementing agriculture and agricultural education initiatives. Through collaboration with other organizations, the Choctaw Nation effectively facilitates programs that benefit their Indigenous peoples. The agricultural education efforts include programs for youth, as well as outreach programs that benefit the greater Indigenous community. Collectively, the Choctaw Nation's programs are designed to support a larger agricultural education aspect for their people.

College of the Muscogee Nation

In respect to the College of the Muscogee Nation, partnerships are an essential component. Partnerships with the local education agencies are important, since the College of the Muscogee Nation utilizes those avenues to reach future Indigenous students. Another important partnership is the Indigenous community. While classes at the College of the Muscogee Nation are primarily held at the institution, there exists some flexibility. The College of the Muscogee Nation's website states, "The majority of classes are offered in Okmulgee; however, depending on the demand from tribal communities, classes may be offered at other sites" (College of the Muscogee Nation, 2020e, para. 5). This statement exhibits the importance of partnerships with the tribal communities. In addition to the institution seeking to support the development of future Indigenous agriculturalists, it also seeks to meet the needs of the community by bringing classes to Indigenous peoples. These efforts occur through the facilitation of positive partnerships with Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

Within each case, the Native nations have taken tremendous strides in asserting tribal sovereignty within agriculture. Each nation has taken initiatives to address the needs of their tribal community. Examples of taking the needs of their people into account are the Quapaw Nation, Osage Nation, and Muscogee (Creek) Nations, which have created meat processing facilities to serve their people. All four Native nations are successful contributors to the cattle industry, while also being active in growing crops and produce. By situating their programs in food sovereignty, these nations have proven themselves successful in agriculture initiatives.

The third theme, *Partnerships are very important*, spans across all cases. Some of the important partnerships for the Oklahoma based Native nations and the College of the Muscogee

Nation include the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Intertribal Agriculture Council, Johnson O'Malley, and local education systems. Federal agencies are important in providing programs and oftentimes, grant funding. The local organizations and county offices support programs at the local level. It is apparent the partnerships with the local education agencies remain important for assistance in implementing programs and reaching Indigenous students. For all the cases, sovereignty is at the core. Native nations have the ability to make choices necessary to meet their goals. While each Native nation views agricultural education a little differently, they each have the sovereign ability to create and implement programs to meet the needs of their Indigenous peoples.

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