

Nation Building for Native Nations:
NNI EdVenture Curriculum
Stephen Cornell
“Overview: The Nation Building Approach”

Slide 3

My job in the next sort of half hour, forty five minutes or so is to give you a little bit of background on where what we're going to be talking about for the next couple of days, where that comes from. Manley mentioned that we've been doing this kind of work for fifteen or more years and the beginnings of it happened actually at Harvard University back in the late 1980's where a couple of us were looking at data from Indian country and began to ask ourselves some questions about it and ended up with a major research project that lies in the background of what we're talking about today.

Slide 4

And we're going to start by looking at a little bit of data here and these are going to be familiar kinds of numbers to you. Unemployment by Bureau of Indian Affairs region, 2001, this is the most recent data the BIA has released, the 2003 data we haven't gotten yet. They do it every two years and it's organized by the region so as you can see these numbers are pretty high. We wouldn't tolerate these levels of unemployment anywhere else in the United States, but we tolerate it in Indian country. The highest number there is 75 in the Great Plains, the Aberdeen area. 75% of the labor force without jobs. The lowest number up there is 38 in the eastern, I guess. So, it's high all across Indian country. The national average is up around the 50% mark or a little higher for reservations. These are reservation figures of course, for all American Indians these figures would be different. But on the reservations, those numbers are way up there. Off the rez [reservation] the numbers tend to be lower because there you're picking up a lot of the urban Indian population where they're in large markets. So, the numbers are lower off rez. But on rez, I think it's fair to say this is the poorest population in the United States. The only real competition comes from Black and Latino inner city populations. Other than those, it's the reservation Indian population. And I don't know of any reason to think that in the last three years since 2001 there has been any dramatic change, these numbers have probably changed somewhat, but nothing dramatic. So, we know Indian country is poor, ok.

Slide 5

But it gets kind of interesting when we look at another set of data. These are changes in poverty levels for selected reservations in the United States in the period '77-'89. Now, you might say to yourself why are you showing us this old data? 1989 is fifteen years ago. This is actually an important period because remember the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed in '88; casino construction began in '89 in some places, the first ones. So, what we're looking at here is before the impact of gaming. And what's interesting to us here, what this change of income you see there refers to the change in the percentage of adults with incomes above the poverty level. So, if you look at the top line, Flathead, that's the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribe's of the Flathead reservation. Sixteen percent increase, families were climbing up out of poverty in Flathead over that

12-year period, they were doing better. If you go to the bottom, Northern Cheyenne, also in Montana, minus fifteen percent, at Northern Cheyenne people were falling into poverty. In that same 12-year period, things were getting worse and worse at Northern Cheyenne. And for the country as a whole all reservations, slightly worse. Remember these were the Reagan years, a lot of cuts in Indian budgets, tough years in Indian country. But in spite of that, there are some nations here which are showing significant improvements in their economies, families getting out of poverty, taking care of themselves. So, you look at this kind of data and you say to yourself, boy there's kind of a question emerging here. Indian country may be poor but it's not uniformly poor. Not everybody's in the same boat. So, how do we explain that? We weren't looking at exactly this data but this is the kind of data that we were looking at back in the mid to late 1980's where we saw there were these differences out there. And we began asking ourselves, well why? Why would some Indian nations be doing so much better than others?

Slide 6

Well these are some of the kinds of things we were talking about. But let me show you just a couple of ... we really got scratching our heads about this, because here are seven nations that we looked at and we asked a few questions. Do they have good natural resources in which case we give them a plus (+). Do they have above average education, if they have average education for Indian country they get a +/-, if they have below average education for Indian country, we give them a minus (-). And location, are they close to a major market or are they in a place that would attract a market to them, we give them a plus, if not we give them a minus. So, the Flatheads in Montana they've got great natural resources, they control the water in the Flathead valley, it's great agricultural land, they've got a big forest up there in the Mission mountains. So, we give them a plus on natural resources. They've got about average education for Indian country, and the Flatheads have a good location because their land sits on that road that runs from Missoula up to Kalispell, Montana. It's a huge tourism attraction in the summertime. Traffic all headed up to Glacier National Park and Waterton Lakes in Canada, so they get a whole lot of tourist traffic moving through there during part of the year and they get hunters and fisherman during a lot of the rest of the year. So, we give them some pluses. Crow, here's the natural resource one that the vice chairman was talking about. The Crow tribe in Montana is sitting on one of the largest deposits of coal in the world and it's under a very shallow overburden, it's easy to get at, it's strip-mineable coal. They've got wonderful grassland; this is part of classic buffalo range coming down out of Canada across the Great Plains. It's great grazing land and it's great wheat country, the Crows have got. They've got water in the Bighorn River, they've got some timber in the Prior Mountains. The Crows are sitting on just a wealth of natural resources. In terms of education, Crows have above average education for Indian country. And in terms of location, interstate 90 runs right through the rez. And one of the interchanges on the rez, a mile up the road is the Custer battlefield, the Little Bighorn Battlefield, a big tourism attraction in the northern plains. So, they're pretty well situated, the Crows.

Slide 7

White Mountain Apache and San Carlos Apache, we give them both pluses on natural resources because of the timber until the forest fire, they lost all the timber. But, lakes,

fishing, timber, hunting, some good natural resources to work with. They both have below average education for Indian country but location, within a couple of hours of Phoenix and Tucson in recreational resources; we rate that as a pretty location. You can attract a lot of people to your land. Ogallala Sioux and Pine Ridge, this is a tough one. Not much in the way of natural resources, they've got some good grass. But when we asked the tribal planner in Pine Ridge, how about cattle as an economy? He said, "Oh, great, I can support 70 families on grass here, what do I do with the other 20,000 people who live on this rez?" They've got a few zeolites to mine but that's about it for natural resources at Pine Ridge. In terms of education? Above average. But location, what's nearby? Not much. They've got Badlands National Park; it's one of the least visited national parks in the country. Just not a lot going for them, so the Sioux don't have too many opportunities.

Slide 8

Cochiti Pueblo over here in New Mexico. Natural resources. Rio Grande River runs through there, but the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, talk about treatment from the U.S. government, they built a dam on the Rio Grande. The dam was badly built; it has seepage from under the dam. It destroyed all of their agricultural land. Farming at Cochiti in a period of about two years, went from the major activity in most of the Pueblo to zero. And the government also took from them 25,000 acres of great grassland. So, Cochiti doesn't have much in the way of natural resources. In terms of education, about average. In terms of location, well they're not too far from Albuquerque and Los Alamos and Santa Fe, so they're doing ok. And finally, Mississippi Choctaw, which Ted mentioned. Natural resources, nope, burned out plantation land. Education? Back in the 1970's when the Mississippi Choctaw started their run, below average for Indian country, in fact way below average. Very bad, poor education there, and in terms of location, nowhere. Sitting there in Mississippi, you remember the film, Mississippi Burning, a decade or a half ago or something? That's around where Mississippi Choctaws are; this is racist country, a tough situation to be in.

Slide 9

You see the column there marked economic development; let's feed that in and see how we do. Well, the Flatheads do pretty well as you'd predict. Today, the Flatheads have a very vigorous economy, it's built partly on small businesses owned by tribal members, not necessarily by the nation, but they've got a lot of their people building businesses. The tribe also they run a couple of significant operations of their own. They work the tourism trade, they do some really interesting stuff up there and they do a good job of it. So, Flathead does well. Crow, three pluses across there. Do you know what the situation is at Crow today? It's about 80% unemployment. Sitting on all this economic opportunity, they have politics that is sometimes violent, the tribal chair before the current one, no, two tribal chairs back, when she was elected and gave an inaugural speech, they had to have armed guards around the podium because they were afraid of violence from the other political factions. They had a gaming enterprise, it folded up, it was at the Little Bighorn Battlefield interchange. A huge traffic flow going through that interchange and they couldn't make the casino work. This is a tribe with all kinds of opportunities. We talk about the tribe, we aren't talking out of school, we worked a lot

with Crow and they have told us these stories. They said, “Yeah, we know we’re having a tough time here and we need to figure out why.” But that one is a surprise to us. Geez, pluses and then nothing. The Apaches, well we’ve put a plus and minus there, now that’s really old information, that forest fire really has demolished one of the biggest economic activities up there, Fatco. But in the 1980’s and part of the 1990’s, the Apache were running the most productive timber operation in the western United States, they were outperforming Warehouse. A tribally owned and operated timber operation. And they had that elk hunt of theirs, which is a moneymaker for the tribe, brings in these trophy hunters from Oklahoma and Texas who pay very big money to bag an Apache elk. They’ve had some good recreational opportunities up there. Sunrise was off to a good start. Today, the tribe is having problems but there was a period there when they were doing a really interesting job with economic development. At the same time, San Carlos, with essentially the same set of resources, not quite as good natural resources, but a similar situation, not doing well. And finally, Mississippi Choctaw. Minuses, natural resources, no. Location, no. Education, no. And look at them. Do you know what the situation is at Mississippi Choctaw today? They import labor. Every morning, more than 5,000 black and white workers drive onto Choctaw land to take jobs in Choctaw owned and operated businesses. 5,000 people because there aren’t enough Choctaw’s. So, they’re just pulling workers onto their land to work in the businesses they own. It’s a very vigorous economy and guess what? They speak Choctaw. That tribe has one of the highest rates of native language retention in the 18-34 year old spread in the U.S.

Slide 10

Well, you know this leaves us scratching our heads. Why do we get Crow, pluses all across on some of these top of the head things and failed economic development. And Mississippi Choctaw, which doesn’t seem to have much to work with and it’s going good. So, we’re scratching our heads about that one and we’re scratching our heads about this one. At least in the late ‘80’s and in much of the 1990’s we had pretty similar situations in two Apache nations that are adjacent to each other and yet we get different outcomes. The outcomes are the same now and that’s something we can talk about. But during the time when we were kind of looking at all of this they looked very different and they had us scratching our heads about that too. I’m thinking, what’s going on there? And then the last one, I haven’t said too much about this, but here’s Cochiti Pueblo. They’re doing well in economic development but I didn’t tell you something about Cochiti. This is a very traditional place. At Cochiti Pueblo there’s no constitution, there are no elections, there’s no legal code, there’s no commercial code. The Cacique, the chief spiritual leader of the nation, every December 29th, calls all the men, men only, into the plaza of Cochiti Pueblo and he appoints the six guys who are going to run the tribe for the next year. He says, “You’re going to be the governor, you’re going to be the lieutenant governor, you’ll be the two fiscales who are going to take care of some of the financial stuff. You two will be the war captains who pay attention to the ceremonial cycle.” And then the Cacique goes back into the Kiva and doesn’t reappear. He’s not allowed to have anything to do with politics until the next December 29th, when he calls all the men in the plaza together and appoints the six who run it that year. We asked John Bawany, and one thing, there’s a council, it’s called the council of principales, it’s made up of everybody who has ever served in one of those six positions and you’re a member of the council for

life. And the Cacique is chosen by the religious societies in secret and it's someone who's been apprenticing since he was a young man. And typically it's an older male who has been through a very long period of spiritual training and he becomes the Cacique. We asked John Bawany who had been governor, appointed, what happens on December 29th when the Cacique gets you all out there? "Oh man," he says. "You try to find the biggest guy you can and stand behind him. You don't want to get picked. There's no salary. And you can't say to the Cacique, well I really appreciate that gesture and your confidence, but I frankly have other things to do, so that's ok, you can choose someone else. No, if the Cacique says you're it, you don't have a choice, you can't say sorry, you have to do it." And then he says, "The future of the place is on your shoulders for a year. And all you can do is sort of go..." And look at them, here today and over the last decade, it's been one of the more successful tribes out there. They run a development cooperation that's been one of the best in Indian country that we've come across. They took this lake that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers created when they damned the river and they've turned it into a recreational place. There's a retirement village for non-Native people on their land. It was started by the Hunt Brothers of Texas. The Hunt Brothers of Texas, when they went bankrupt after trying to corner the silver market twenty years ago or something like that. Cochiti bought the place, bought out their lease and today they run it, the tribe does. Now we're really scratching our heads. What's going on here? We've got these success stories around Indian Country and they don't fit our preconceived ideas about what makes development work.

Slide 11

So, we decided we'd take a hard look at that as researchers. We spent a lot of time out in the field on reservations talking to people like all of you, the people who have the jobs, the kind that make good decisions about the future. We got histories of the tribal enterprises, we talked to the people at ground level about working in the tribal enterprises, we studied constitutions, we tried to figure out what's going on, we got a lot of data, numerical data and analyzed that. And, the things that emerged as important turned out to be these and we're going to talk about these a lot over the next few days. First, sovereignty, genuine self-rule. And we'll talk about what that means and why it's important to economic development. But it turns out that you've got to be calling the shots yourself because the other thing that shows up is that you can act like a sovereign as much as you want but if you don't back it up with smart policies, capable governance, and so forth, good communication, that sort of thing, you can get into trouble. You can find yourself in the kinds of battles that you don't want to lose in the court or someplace because you haven't backed up that power with effective institutions of governance. So, the second thing that emerged from this research was across these nations what we saw was, there were these guys who were pushing the envelope and the ones who were really doing well were the ones who were pushing that envelope and backing it up with smart organization, good rules, smart policies, they were cracker jack at this and they were learning from each other, there was a lot of back and forth among those who were doing well, saying, "What, how did you guys do that? Well, we're trying this." So, the first two things that emerged were, you got to be pushing for genuine self-rule and you got to be backing it up with good governance. And the third thing was, there was a cultural issue in there. If you think about, what does good government look like? Well, Cochiti Pueblo

seems to do it and it doesn't look at all the way it looks at Flathead. You go up to confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes at Flathead and their government looks like something out of my high school civics textbook. Strong independent court system, parliamentary democracy, all this other stuff. You go to Cochiti Pueblo and you can't recognize any of it from anything I learned about government but it works. They do it in the way that works for Cochiti Pueblo. They don't just buy some other body else's institutions like U.S. institutions. U.S. is real good at going around the world and saying, "You need a better government. You need our institutions." And we've been doing it to Indian tribes. But this cultural issue says, the institutions, the organization that's going to work best is going to be the one that your own people say, "This is ours, these are our institutions, this is our government." That's what Cochiti's got. So, there's this issue of yeah, building capable government but building it in a way that matches your own strongest ideas about how to govern, how to exercise authority. So that what works at Navajo, in Manley's country, may be real different from what works up at Swinomish in Washington State. But they could both be successful. Strategic orientation, all that means is thinking for the long term, it's being engaged in some of the stuff that you all have been doing. Trying to put together that long-term plan that says when we make decisions today, we want to be thinking about what the long-term goals are. And then one of the issues that came up right at the start, leadership, turns out to be important. Now, we're going to get into more detail about these things in the course of today and tomorrow. But those were the key things that came out of that work.

Slide 12

So, let me just cover real quick here some starting assumptions. We think most of the problems that Indian nations face aren't Indian problems; they're problems that societies everywhere face. But they're made a whole lot worse in Indian country by the kinds of things the vice chairman was just talking about. That history of colonialism and stripping away the land base and confining people and assuming all that power. That's made those issues a lot tougher for you to deal with than for a lot of other places to deal with. They're enormously more complicated in Indian country because of that history. But finally, what we're talking about here is not just economic development; it's really about trying to build societies that work.

Slide 13

And we were up in Canada doing some of this for some First Nations up there. And somebody said, "What do you mean by societies that work?" So, here's at least a stab at a definition. Societies that work are capable of pursuing their own objectives effectively. They can get organized and do stuff. When they decide they want to do something, they're able to pursue it. They give their citizens opportunities to lead satisfying and productive lives. Doing whatever that may be subsistence hunting in Alaska, maybe working in a casino in Florida, maybe livestock in South Dakota, or silver at Navajo or someplace. They deal with internal differences and disputes fairly and effectively without tearing themselves apart. You know all human societies have disagreements. The real question is what do you do with them, what effect do they have? Some places destroy themselves and other places figure out ways to take a dispute and come out the other end stronger. And finally and this goes to that intergovernmental thing that chairman just mentioned there,

societies that are able to build relationships with other sovereigns, other governments, other peoples that work together. So, that's what we're going to be talking about over the next little while.