

Project Venture Presentation to Commission on Native Children  
7/28/2020

Presenter: McClellan Hall, Cherokee  
Former Teacher and Principal of tribal schools  
Developer of Project Venture  
Completed BA and went back for an additional year in the Native American Teacher Education Program, at the University of Washington  
Completed student teaching at the first BIE contract school in the US, on Navajo Nation  
Completed a Masters in Education at Arizona State University  
Directed the alternative school for Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the Tacoma Indian Center (later became the Chief Leschi School)  
Founded the National Indian Youth Leadership Project

Project Venture came about as a result of a dream that came to me in the 70's. I didn't understand the dream, so I filed it away, never forgetting about it. In 1980 I was hired to direct the alternative school for Cherokee Nation. I met a Cherokee medicine man, healer and spiritual leader. As I got to know him better, I shared the dream with him. He interpreted the dream and explained it to me. He told me, '**this is what you are being asked to do**'. He is 90 years old now and has been an inspiration and has guided our work.

While I was directing the school for Cherokee Nation, the beginnings of Project Venture came together. We blended the academic curriculum with outdoor adventure, we had the best ropes course in Oklahoma at that time, we started a leadership camp in 1982, we were doing service learning projects, we had an expeditionary learning program and were working to emulate the original Red Bird school, which opened in the mid 1800's, named for Red Bird Smith, the leader of the Keetoowah traditional faction of the Cherokees.

Later in the mid 80's, based on positive feedback from parents, school administrators and tribal leaders, I took the camp model apart and redesigned it into a year round program, that later became Project Venture. I formed a Board of Directors and created the National Indian Youth Leadership Project. We received several grants in the late 80's and in 1990 received a High Risk Youth Demonstration grant, a five-year grant from SAMHSA. NIYLP was one of 12 Native grants funded. We served four Native communities in New Mexico, Laguna, Acoma, Zuni and Pine Hill.

Our data was so good that it caught the attention of SAMHSA and Project Venture was included in the **SAMHSA National High Risk Youth Study**.

- Project Venture was found to be the **Most Effective program for Native youth** in the study (50 programs and 10,000 youth).

- Project Venture had all eight **Characteristics of the Most Effective Programs**
- Project Venture has continued for 30+ years uninterrupted
- Currently Project Venture has over 60 replication sites across the US, Canada and Hawaii
- Project Venture has over 25 years of evaluation data
- Project Venture has a 350 page curriculum, with lesson plans for one year ( in-school, after school, weekends, school breaks and multi-day trips and summer camps)
- Project Venture adopted by the Canadian Government in 2008
- Project Venture has numerous awards and recognitions

### **What the program looks like**

Target population is 5-8<sup>th</sup> grade and high school, developmentally appropriate activities for this age group. Group stays together over the course of a year, for 200 hours or more.

- The groups meet once a week in school. Project Venture staff are allowed in to a classroom, for team building, group problem solving, group decision making, introduction to positive norms, called **Full Value Commitment: Be Here, Be Safe, Speak your truth, Set Goals and Let go and Move on.**
- Group meets at least once each week for after school
- Group activities minimum of one weekend each month, preferably more
- Activities on all school breaks, multi-day trips
- Summer camps and treks, including the Grand Canyon trip

We incorporate teachings from traditional rites of passage ceremonies. At our camps and on trips, we have gender talks in evenings, boys and men and women and girls meet to discuss teachings. We are introducing and promoting healthy relationships, appropriate roles and behavior for young men and women and respect between genders. There is emotional and physical challenge in our activities, getting out of the comfort zone.

## Characteristics of the Most Effective Programs

There were five or eight of these characteristics found, one report lists five and another lists eight.

- **Life Skills:** In Project Venture the outdoors is ideal for learning life skills, using challenge circles, ropes course, getting out of the comfort zone, etc. We look to traditional rites of passage ceremonies. In many tribes and situations, young people are not taking part in these ceremonies. We work with elders and incorporate these teachings into our curriculum.
- **Connection Building:** Program focuses on building connections for your students, to the group, to culture and language and to the community. Service Learning is one approach we use. Kids learn to take a critical look at the community and identify projects that they could do that will improve the quality of life, from the youth perspective. Projects can be connected to academic content areas, also culture and language. Elders should be involved.
- **Community Support:** Often programs are brought into a community when a grant is funded. Has the community been involved in planning, do they support and understand the program? Collaboration with key partners, schools, police, other agencies. What about evaluation, sustainability?
- **Reflection:** Every activity has a reflection component. After an activity, we debrief and talk about what just happened, get the kid's feedback on what we did. We use the moving story approach to get feedback from everyone. Start with one person who describes what happened first, then each person adds to the story. Talk about what happened, why is it important, how would you apply that new knowledge or confidence to another situation? We use journals, which can be shared or private. We provide time to go off and write without distractions. Staff reminds and goes back to earlier conversations so kids remember what they said and experienced.
- **Program Coherence:** In the High Risk Youth Study, Coherence means several things. Staff needs to be thoroughly familiar with the theoretical basis of the program. Staff needs to be able to articulate what your program is doing, if you are called on to explain the program to parents, tribal officials, school personnel. Staff is competent, all NIYLP staff certified as Wilderness First Responders, slightly less than EMT level medical training, certified life guards, other certifications.
- **Intensity:** NIYLP engages youth for 200 or more hours over the course of a year. This was found to be critical in the study. Project Venture has a scope and sequence of activities. A random set of activities does not work. Less than 150-200 hours will not get best evaluation outcomes.
- **Positive Environment:** Elders we have worked with have emphasized the importance of staying positive with youth in all programming. Avoid the authoritarian, disciplinarian, punitive approach. We studied Dr. Emoto's research with water, where he experimented with exposing water to positive and negative thoughts, words and music. Water that was exposed to positive

thoughts and language and music produced amazing crystal structures when frozen. Water exposed to negative thoughts, words and violent music produced no crystal structure at all. Our bodies are 70-80% water, so the same principles apply to our youth. Treat youth as assets, resources to be developed for the future of our communities.

### **Program ingredients/environment**

- Outdoors, Natural world, culture
- Introduce an ethic of service, traditional value of service, words for this in Native language
- Cultural appropriateness
- Importance of understanding the concept of the seen and unseen world
- We have taken elements from several areas of research, Positive Youth Development, Social Emotional Learning, Health benefits of being outdoors, ( Nature Deficit Disorder) Rites of Passage ceremonies, Dr. Emoto's research on water, Steven Glenn's work on Habilitation, Kurt Hahn's work that led to the creation of Outward Bound, Service Learning Research, Dr. Herbert Benally's work on Navajo Philosophy of Education, others.

Former Executive Director of the Santa Fe Mountain Center, nationally known outdoor adventure program, commended Project Venture on being "ahead of the research for many years", based on our work with Native elders.

### **Project Venture Camps**

Camp program began in 1982-83. Camps are 5-8 days, originally were 10 days. Include rock climbing, ropes course, mountain biking, canoeing, kayaking, rafting, archery, traditional fire building, etc. Camps include service projects, equine programs, nutrition (no junk food or soda). Clan groups spend the week together, go through a sequence of activities. High school age youth serve as mentors to mid school kids. NIYLP has a mentoring program where we training the high school students for this role. Three of our full time staff are young adults who came up through our program since 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Two of our Board members also came up through our programs since 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

12-year history of programs in Canada, 9 provinces. Canadian government had mandate in 2008 to find an evidence based program for First Nations communities and they contacted us about Project Venture. We just completed a five-year grant in Ontario in a remote, high-risk community. Results: zero suicides, excellent evaluation results, significant improvements in the relationship between the community and the police and dramatic decrease in juvenile crime. Just completed a five-year project on Pine Ridge in South Dakota. We started with one school and are now up to six. Zero suicides in these programs in five years. We have projects in Hawaii that have been going for over 10 years.

Project Venture replication training has been going on annually for 20 years. We also have been doing the NNED training for SAMHSA for six years. We offer a Facilitator training annually.

My last comments had to do with our frustration with what we see as the lack of support on the federal level for a program that has been designated as the Most Effective Program for Native Youth in the National High Risk Youth Study. We earned the Model Program Award from SAMHSA and NREPP and had all of the elements of the Most Effective Programs and have sustained the program for over 30 years, but Native communities are still reinventing the wheel. The information from the high-risk study is not being promoted at SAMHSA.

I also was impressed with the presentation on the research at the Children’s Trauma Center and would like to talk with them about involving us in their research. We didn’t know about their work and they don’t know about ours. As a small nonprofit, with 15 staff, we don’t have the time or resources to write peer reviewed papers. We have proven that Project Venture works in multiple tribal settings. I feel that our work has been overlooked, while it may be some of the most important work going on in Indian country.

During COVID-19, we have been raising funds to give gift cards for food and other supplies to the families of the Native kids we work with in New Mexico and South Dakota. Many of the families are not eligible for unemployment and have few resources, so we are sending out monthly \$100 gift cards, masks, hand sanitizer, etc. Many of these families don’t even have running water, so hand washing isn’t possible. We are also buying laptops, have set up our own You Tube channel, we are creating videos on exercise, running, stretching, hiking, gardening, cooking, etc. We started with a Go Fund Me that raised \$30,000, then got a matching grant for \$30,000 more, then just got a \$75,000 grant and another to match it, so we have raised over \$200,000. We are buying laptops for the Pine Ridge Girl’s school, on the Pine Ridge reservation, since they will not be able to start school in person. We are thinking we will be buying about 200 chrome books. We have also been doing a lot of zoom calls keeping in touch with all our program sites and helping them with ideas to keep the kids involved. I think I’m working harder now than before the pandemic.

## Project Venture’s Effective Program Components

<b>Common Factors</b>	<b>Project Venture Program Component/Practice to address the Common Factor</b>
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<b>Engagement</b>	Cultural content, leadership, values/experiential learning/connecting to the natural world/ physical and emotional challenge.
<b>Intensity</b>	150 + hours year (3+ hours per week) 68 sessions/In & after school, weekends, summer
<b>Reflection Orientation</b>	Outdoor adventure: problem solving; Service learning: student led, problem solving; Camp, treks: journaling, values, norms, natural world, spiritual awareness; Native cultural values: spiritual traditions; In school: Problem Solving, skill building, socialization.
<b>Connectedness Building</b>	Outdoor adventure: team building, trust building; Service learning: youth led, meaningful, relationship emphasis; service ethic; Camp, treks: building caring, cooperative community; Native cultural values; family events, cultural traditions.
<b>Life-Skills Focused</b>	Outdoor adventure: cooperation, leadership, efficacy; Service learning: problem solving, leadership, cooperation; Camp, treks: leadership, efficacy; In school: problem solving, skill building.
<b>Positive Environment</b>	Cultural content; adult participation, interaction, trust, support.
<b>Coherence</b>	Clear purpose and process; training; collaboration; implementation project.
<b>Community Support</b>	Guided by Native Elders; Native cultural values; positive youth development approach; collaboration.

The National High Risk Youth Cross-Site Study (HRY) identified eight components that the most effective prevention programs for youth share. According to Dr. Fred Springer, Director of the National High Risk Youth Cross Site Study, Project Venture is the only prevention program that includes components and practices for all eight factors.

In the chart below, the left hand column identifies the common factors that that highly effective programs share. In the right hand column there is a description of how the Project Venture model addresses each one of these.