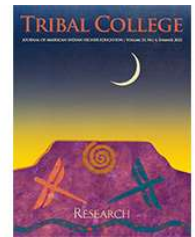


TRIBAL COLLEGE

JOURNAL OF AMERICAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION



[MENU](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [DONATE](#) | [JOB BOARD](#) | [TCJ STUDENT](#) | [TRIBAL COLLEGE PRESS](#) | [AIHEC](#)



Latest: [Research](#) | [Leadership](#) | [Building Partnerships](#) | [Tribal College Alumni](#)

[Home](#) › [Features](#) › [Four Legged Healers: Horse Culture as Medicine](#)

Four Legged Healers: Horse Culture as Medicine

Volume 27, No. 4 - Summer 2016

Jessica White Plume ♦ May 1, 2016

5140



In one of my first and favorite undergraduate psychology courses, we read Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn helped us to see that scientific progress through the accumulation of knowledge (which we believe to be fact) is not as solid and linear as scientists might believe. Rather, there are cycles of learning across history. Every so often we will be challenged, leading to a paradigm shift where what we believed to be absolutely true might be completely discarded. After such a shift occurs, the way we look at knowledge in a field is never the same again. This important academic lesson has everything to do with Native health and "Good Medicine" today because the paradigm from which we are working determines what we think the problems are, as well as what we think is possible in terms of interventions.

To return to wellness we must honor our Indigenous wellness paradigms.

What do we think of when we hear the word "therapy"? Living in the modern world that we do, some may think of psychological treatment that they would receive in a clinic or hospital. Others may think of AA meetings. We must recognize that these are interventions that are based on the western European paradigm of illness and diagnosis, in which an individual is experiencing "symptoms," and treatment draws upon scientific knowledge to reduce those symptoms. Now, placing ourselves in history, what did our ancestors do for therapy? Those who still practice traditional Native culture may think of medicine people who use plants, herbs, or other natural remedies. Of course this would not be called therapy, but rather something like medicine or healing. Taking it even further, let's imagine our ancestral nations when they were flourishing cultures. What might we discover? Images reflecting the

MOCCASIN MILLENNIAL



Into the Black

June 6, 2022 | By Brianna G. Reed

"If you're surrounded by fire, do you know where to go?"

[Read and LISTEN →](#)

DISPLACED NATIVE



The Intimacy of Nature

May 16, 2022 | By Mickki Garrity

All life is intimately connected and built on the principles of touch, of connection, of sharing.

[Read more →](#)

Employment Opportunities

Native American Student Success
Associate or Assistant Director June

"Masters of the Plains" may come to mind; societies in which all goods and practices were tied to nature in every way. I am suggesting that these images do not only reflect visual scenes or cultural practices, but that they also demonstrate a health and wellness paradigm. That is, living well meant there was no separation between nature and the people. We knew our place within nature; we knew that we are nature. As such, we honored and learned from our relatives, such as the horse nation, buffalo nation, and silent nation (plants), about living in balance. The extent to which we currently see ourselves as individual people, separate from nature and each other, is a sign of our adopting a western European paradigm as a result of colonization. However, during this current generation, as prophesized by Black Elk, many Indigenous people are reclaiming their own worldviews and using these for healing. With humility, I genuinely believe this is what Black Elk saw when he spoke of us "Mending the Sacred Hoop" at this time (Black Elk & Neihardt, 1932).

HORSES AS HEALERS

"Siya'ka said that once, when hard pressed on the warpath, he dismounted, and standing in front of his horse spoke to him, saying:

'We are in danger. Obey me promptly so that we may conquer. If you have to run for your life and mine, do your best, and if we reach home I will give you the best eagle feather I can get and the finest red cloth, and you shall be painted with the best paint.'"

(Densmore, 1992)

A return to wellness for our people—overcoming all the "risk factors" and health disparities we hear so much about—will require us to honor our Indigenous wellness paradigms. In this direction, there has been a movement of horse culture-based wellness and education programs in many tribal communities. Most people call it "horse therapy."

Our relationship with the horse nation is deeply rooted in our shared history. According to the origin stories of various tribes, horses originated here in North America and came to us as relatives and as a gift from the Creator, making it a sacred relationship. After migrating around the world and finally returning with the Spanish in the 16th century, the horse nation and tribal people together changed the cultural landscape of North America. We were "Masters of the Plains" and we developed horsemanship skills that have become legendary and iconic. As a result of this relationship, tribes were able to prosper in terms of food, clothing, and other goods. Indeed, for some tribes, horses became actual currency or wealth because they were the key to all other resources.

Nearly all aspects of life depended upon or happened in conjunction with horses. Hunting was obviously transformed with the speed of the horse; hunters could now hunt larger game like buffalo and travel greater distances to expand hunting regions. Because they were so treasured, the best were kept in lodges during times of danger. Children's early introduction to social responsibility and independence often took the form of caring for and riding horses. Adolescents publicly demonstrated character development, as well as their physical fitness and coordination, by training horses and through mastery of horsemanship games. Among many tribes, young men proposing marriage ceremonially offered horses to the father of the bride. In another ceremony, families honored the accomplishments of relatives or loved ones in the highest way by giving away horses on their behalf (Horse Capture & Her Many Horses, 2006).

Sadly, part of the process of colonization and assimilation included the removal of our horses and the ensuing decline of the horse culture lifestyle. The loss of our horses is parallel with the loss of our culture and the trauma we have suffered in many ways. However, with amazing resilience some have managed to maintain this sacred relationship with the horse, passing the knowledge on within the family.

In recent years, numerous tribal individuals and organizations have begun to acknowledge our historic connection to the horse as a legitimate form of intervention in our communities. A wide variety of programs that can be broadly described as horse culture-based initiatives are all ultimately moving in similar directions. Some have begun within the criminal justice system, rehabilitating incarcerated youth with horses. Some honor their ancestors and strengthen their future through honoring rides such



A growing movement in Indian Country, horse culture-based wellness and therapy draws on the historic connections between horses and Indigenous peoples.

22, 2022

Theatre Instructor, Haskell Indian Nations University June 21, 2022

Chemistry Instructor, Haskell Indian Nations University June 21, 2022

Western Michigan University, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs June 21, 2022

Chemistry Instructor, Haskell Indian Nations University June 21, 2022

FREE Email Newsletter

News and events that impact you happen more often than we can print. Stay up to date with enews, blogs, and the latest job openings.

Sign up today!

Recent Most Viewed

CCCC's Adult Learning Center Celebrates Student Success

NTU's Culinary Arts Program Earns ACF Accreditation

Full House in Crownpoint: NTU Forum Draws All 15 Candidates for President

Honoring Juneteenth in Our Classroom Conversations

MMIW

Raise awareness of the ongoing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Peoples.

Download, print, and post TCJ Student's high-resolution posters.

as the Sitanka Wokiksuye (Big Foot Memorial Ride) and the Dakota 38 Ride. Others are leading traditional horse societies which offer youth and families societal roles, purpose, and activities year-round. Many tribes are hosting **traditional horse games and races**, often sponsored by individual families within communities. And many are offering cultural horse camps and natural horsemanship training mentorship.

What is formally called “horse therapy,” or equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP), is now a well-recognized branch of mental health. Various certification programs exist, and their host organizations provide resources on their websites and through the networks of people who have experience with EAP. Many tribal groups have attended these trainings and attempted to culturally integrate them in their home communities. At this time, there is one organization which provides training and certification in an approach to healing with horses that is based on traditional Native understandings and spirituality, the Medicine Wheel Model of Horsemanship (Whiteman Jr. & Two Bulls, 2016).



The Horse Nation Initiative at NHSC gives students the opportunity to spend time on a ranch, learning experientially with professors and horses.

The horse is gifted with a sensitivity that helps us by mirroring our emotions.

Each of these models recognizes that the horse is gifted with a sensitivity that helps us by mirroring our emotions. Our interactions with a horse will reflect what is true in our lives, and help us to rebalance ourselves. At the same time, their way of being, and our interacting with them in nature, makes this process natural and easy. In the Medicine Wheel Model, we recognize this is because when we are working with the horse, we are working “spirit to spirit.”

NUETA HIDATSA SAHNISH COLLEGE HORSE NATION INITIATIVE

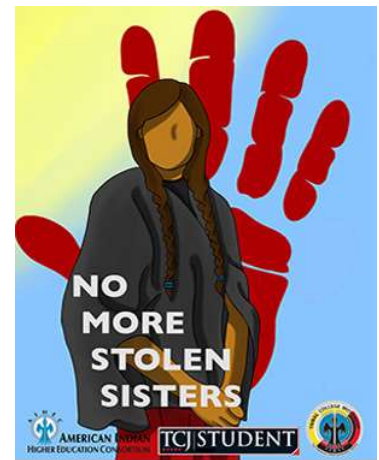
While typical academic institutions may not combine psychology and agriculture, this pairing makes all the sense in the world from the Indigenous wellness paradigm. At Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College (NHSC), we offer a variety of psychology and animal science courses based on horse culture wellness, and we are in the process of developing a degree program in the field. Students in these classes even spend time on a ranch, learning experientially with professors and horses.

NHSC also offers a horse nation outreach program for the community at large that includes weekly family horsemanship nights open to anyone interested in connecting with horses or wanting to learn to ride. These classes are highly attended. Unlike some health interventions, there is never a need to provide incentives to increase participation. On the contrary, parents often approach us with interest in the program. In addition, we partner with other community groups for events such as healing rides and horse games and races. Finally, because the Three Affiliated Tribes on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation has a rich history of rodeo and is home to many rodeo legends, we have developed an NHSC horse nation rodeo team.

But is NHSC’s horse nation program effective? Does it work? From a contemporary scientific community perspective, there is considerable research to support horse culture-based interventions (EAGALA, 2010). Studies show the positive effects on individuals participating in a variety of horse programs. From a community-based research outcomes perspective, which is also consistent with a more holistic view of wellness, we too have seen considerable change within our community as a result of our horse programs.



According to students in the program, horse-based therapy leads to an increase in confidence, patience, calmness, and authenticity.



Download Poster 1



Download Poster 2

Surveys from the program show significant increases in confidence. In the evaluations, students were asked to describe in their own words what the horses have taught them. Answers indicate that the program is meeting certain needs. One student wrote, “I learned that it is always good to ‘center yourself’ before working with horses or animals/people in general because they will feel your calmness and are able to connect with you quicker.” Another noted, “I learned to be a leader, as opposed to being bossy.”

When we are working with the horse, we are working “spirit to spirit.”

Horses also help people process difficult experiences that they may not feel comfortable sharing with others. One student wrote, “The story about the horse’s scar hit a soft spot for me because I was scarred as a child.” And because horses reflect the true energy and emotion of a person, they teach us about authenticity. “The horses taught me to be more honest with myself and others. They also taught me to be patient and that I am capable of doing more than I thought,” one student testified. Perhaps the most common response we hear is that of generally being uplifted by the spirit of the horses. “When I go out to the ranch, I feel like I’m able to get my emotions back in balance,” a student revealed.

Students also note that life lessons learned from the horses carry over to other parts of their lives. One respondent shared this anecdote: “[A woman] was approaching me aggressively, I immediately remembered working with the horse. I felt like moving her out of my space and I was able to resolve the situation in a good way.” Finally, there’s the spiritual impact, as related by this teen girl who exclaimed, “I feel amazing, I feel like I can do anything!”

HEALING FOR THE FUTURE

Horse culture-based healing and wellness efforts all across Indian Country are part of a major movement happening right now. It is a paradigm shift toward natural ways to live well. It is being documented by many. Be a part of the movement and consider how wellness and healing might be redefined in your community. Is it allowing the earth to heal us through gardening? Is it realigning our vibrations with song and the drum? Is it uplifting the talents of Native youth athletes or performers? The healing power of the horse meets all of these tests and so much more. With the wisdom of our ancestors, and the inspiration of our children, the answers lie within each of us and we can come to thrive once again.

Jessica White Plume, Ph.D., M.P.H. (Oglala Lakota), is the director of the Agriculture Department and Land Grants at Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College in New Town, North Dakota.

REFERENCES

Black Elk, & Neihardt, J.G. (1932). *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (1988 ed.). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Densmore, F. (1992). *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

EAGALA (2010). Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, Inc. Research. Retrieved February 8, 2016, from <http://www.eagala.org/Research> Horse Capture, G.P., & Her Many Horses, E. (2006). *A Song for the Horse Nation: Horses in Native American Cultures*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum.

Kuhn, T. (1962). *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Whiteman Jr., P., & Two Bulls, L. (2016). Medicine Wheel Model. Retrieved February 8, 2016, from <http://medicinewheelmodelcircularthinking.com/>

<< Previous | Next >>

You might also be interested in

ALSO ON TRIBALCOLLEGEJOURNAL.ORG

A Beloved Haskell Instructor's Passing ...

8 months ago • 1 comment

McKinney taught at Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) for over 20 years.

We Must Listen to the Earth

2 years ago • 2 comments

Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have respected and listened to ...

Strength in Solida

3 years ago • 1 comment

Indigenous women are disproportionately affected by violence and trauma

1 Comment

tribalcollegejournal.org

Disqus' Privacy Policy

Login

Favorite 4

Tweet

Share


Sort by Best

Join the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?

Name

 **Chance Rodeo Battlehawk** • 3 years ago

Thank you for this article.

^ | • Reply • Share ›

Subscribe

Add Disqus to your siteAdd DisqusAdd

Do Not Sell My Data

TRIBAL COLLEGE
JOURNAL OF AMERICAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION
679 East 2nd Ave, Suite E-1
Durango, CO 81301
(970)764-4238

Upcoming Issues

Writers' Guidelines

AIHEC

Contact Us

Advertise

History

Advisory Board

