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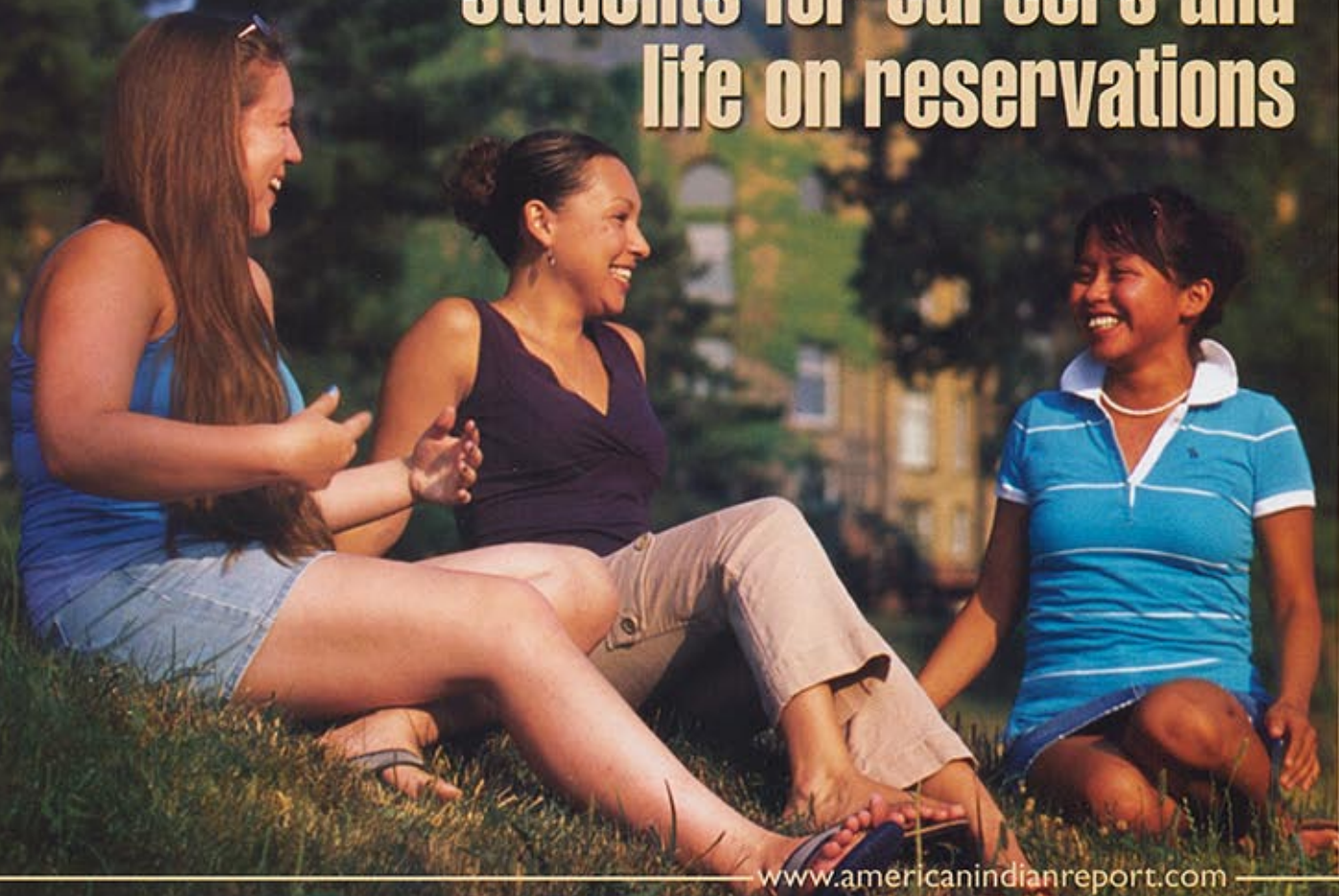
August 2005

# INDIAN REPORT

*Indian Country's News Magazine*

## Indian Country 101

Universities prepare Indian students for careers and life on reservations



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**INDIAN  
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COVER

**Indian Country 101 —  
Universities prepare Indian  
students for careers and life  
on reservations**

*By Michelle Tirado*

Universities are not renowned for their Native American offerings — academic programs and student services. Yet some, including state and Ivy League institutions, are building their reputations as major educational hubs for Indian students.

On the Cover:  
Cornell University Students Kyrie Ransom,  
Anna Ballenger and Kelsey-Rae Long.  
Photo by Shai Eynav.

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# A Weave Through Time

*Artists, scholars, researchers and collectors explore the past, present and future of Navajo weaving*

By Lee Allen

ESTABLISHED IN 1893, ARIZONA STATE Museum in Tucson is the oldest and largest anthropology museum in the Southwest. So, when it comes to discussing the past, opinions here are based on experience. One such discussion took place recently, a Navajo weaving symposium that linked 19th century blankets and 20th century rugs with viewpoints from the 21st century.

"We wanted to show three centuries of historical Navajo weaving to tell the story of past vitality, honoring the past — an interesting, vibrant, changing time — and linking it to the present," said anthropologist Ann Hedlund, the museum's director of tapestry exhibitions.

The effort appeared successful, as a packed house of Navajo weavers and artists, scholars, researchers and collectors spent four days examining the current state of Navajo weaving, tracing its history and trying to predict its future. Assistant Museum Curator Lisa Falk welcomed attendees and nearly 50 Native American weavers from several western states with these words: "A rug is not just a piece of yarn, it's creativity filled with emotion." And, indeed, the concept of from-the-heart-to-the-head-to-the-loom became a mantra often repeated from the dais.

"I'm a fifth-generation weaver," said Barbara Ornelas, who first sat in front of a loom at age six. "My mother, sister and aunt showed me the technique of weaving. My grandmothers taught me the myths behind story themes." She had a lot of time to learn, living in a hogan near Two Grey Hills Trading Post, located between Shiprock and Gallup, N.M. "We had no running water, no electricity, so distractions were minimal," she remembered. "I tried to write down weaving instructions, but my

grandmother rebelled, telling me I needed to see creativity in my heart and mind before it would appear on the loom. When you hit the loom and hear that distinctive sound, that's the heartbeat of your family, which will be passed on." Sure enough, it has been, as both her daughter — and her son — have taken up the art of weaving.

"Weavers are artists too," Ornelas said, not-

and shear the sheep, color, card and spindle the wool, weave it according to their creative muse and often times act as their own retailer, selling their wares themselves."

"This is not a hobby," said Hedlund. "In Navajo weaving, it's always been about supporting a family by making a living." And sell it does, its popularity derived from this distinction. "There is a bit of commonality with weaving worldwide, a sense of continuity from generation to generation in terms of a focus on the process," Hedlund continued. "But it is unique in the North American continent as far as native weaving goes. The numbers and visibility of Navajo weavers have made it so. And the final product is a tangible way to retain the wisdom, thoughts and inspirations of elders, as Navajo weaving embodies the teachings and cultural ideas that generations grow up with. It allows people to see those concepts in practice and continue to pass them on."

Members of Marilou Schultz's Tabaah clan have been passing these philosophies along for four generations, utilizing the tried-and-true while experimenting with innovation. Introduced as "a trailblazer of Navajo weaving," Shultz said she likes to vary what she does and how she does it. Still comfortable with a basic two-heddle weave, she will stretch her creativity at times, like using two looms and going back and forth to make a three-

panel run. "I've come full circle," she said.

Although scholars have not been able to put a precise date on the beginnings of Navajo loom weaving (tribal mythology says holy people like Spider Man and Spider Woman taught Navajo women to weave), evidence points to the second half of the 17th

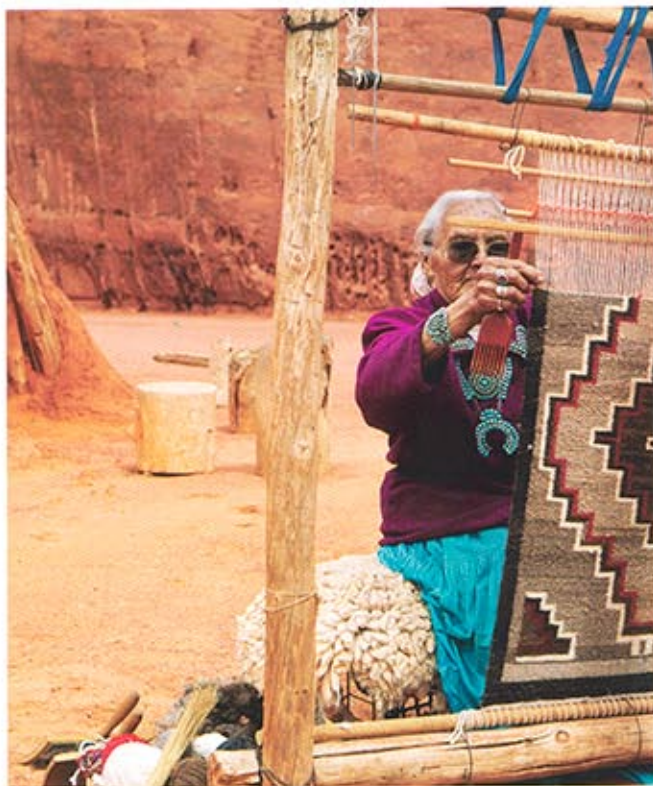


Photo by Jeffrey W. Johnson

ing that the difference between other forms of expression was the fact that weavers themselves are responsible for every aspect of their creations. "Artists see it in their mind and paint it on canvas. Sculptors envision their idea and carve it in stone. But they don't make their own canvas or grow their own rocks. Weavers raise

century. Puebloan peoples had been raising cotton and weaving it into clothing on upright looms since the 1100s. When Spaniards arrived in the Southwest, they brought churro sheep and introduced the concept of weaving wool into cloth. Historians now divide the more than 250 years of early Navajo weaving into a Classic Period [1650-1868], a Transitional Period [1868-1890] and a Rug Period [1890-1920].

Early Navajo blankets were used as outer garments for protection from high-elevation elements in northern Arizona, southern Utah and western New Mexico. The tightly woven wool, with striped designs and weaving techniques of diamond and diagonal twill, provide warmth and shed water. By the Classic Period, Navajo serapes had been influenced by the brightly colored and boldly patterned Saltillo serapes of Mexico and began to appear with terraced zigzag and diamond motifs. Weavers augmented natural white and brown wool colors with navy blue, vivid red and brilliant purple, with dyes made from indigo plants, lac (tree resin deposited by certain insects) and cochineal (pulverized small insects that feed on cactus).

Much of the early experimentation of using whatever was available is still practiced today,

despite advances in coloration technology. "I like to try different variations of the old ways," said Schultz, who remembers the early days when she made her own natural dyes from roots, berries, plants and leaves. "There were no recipes, no one to say no and the whole world was your experimental laboratory. We'd use what was around the house, like wild carrot, golden rod, walnuts, mushrooms, indigo and rabbit brush. We'd put everything in a pot, mix it up and let it sit to see what we would end up with. We learned by self-exploration and experimentation and were rewarded with a lot of pleasant, but unexpected, results." She still likes to experiment with variations on a theme. "I've always been fascinated with colors, and now I like to mix aniline and chemical dyes in different kinds of pots, stainless steel, copper, tin and cast iron, just to see what will happen."

Today's color combinations, often a spectrum of brilliant colors, are a far cry from early tinting. "Indigo from Mexico was probably the most important dyestuff ever introduced into the Southwest, often the only home-dyed color to appear in products made by Navajo, Pueblo, and Spanish weavers," wrote anthropologist Joe Ben Wheat in his research classic, *Blanket Weaving in*

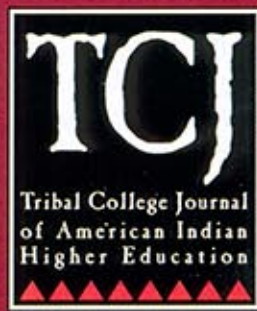
*the Southwest* (University of Arizona Press, 2003). Indigo may have been the most important blue dye in the Southwest, but it wasn't the only one. Navajos had a native blue dye made from a bluish clay boiled with sumac leaves while Hopi tribal members made their color from blue-black beans and corn.

Hedlund, a textile authority (she edited Wheat's book and authored several of her own, including *Navajo Weaving in the Late Twentieth Century*), emphasizes a kin and community commonality of thought regardless of the colors or patterns used. "Navajo weavings embody a variety of teachings, cultural issues and ideas that generations have grown up with," she said. "The influence on weavers of family, community, artistic identity and impact of the marketplace is shown in these tangible pieces of evidence that retain the wisdom, thoughts and inspiration of elders. These weavings allow people to actually see artistic interpretations of these practices and provide a way to continue to pass them on to future generations."

Although the Navajo weaving exhibition at Arizona State Museum is gone, other museum collections and exhibitions tell the story of 13,000 years of human history in the Southwest [[www.statemuseum.arizona.edu](http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu)]. □



Photo by: Ken Blackbird - [Kenbikbird@aol.com](mailto:Kenbikbird@aol.com)



"Whoever controls the education of our children controls our future..."

— Wilma P. Mankiller, Cherokee

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