

Creating Future Agricultural Leaders Within Native Nations in Oklahoma

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Abstract

This research looks at the agricultural history and current agricultural systems of four Oklahoma-based Native nations and the College of the Muscogee Nation. The study also specifically looks at the development of future agricultural leaders.

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. Ranching, for example, supported the traditional strength of community by being able to feed their people through the distribution of beef, teach responsibility to their children, and encourage reciprocity.

Whether nations were farming or ranching, they were engaged with agriculture and their community. Through the process of colonialism, there has always been an engagement of Eurocentric agriculture and place based Indigenous approaches to agriculture. As settlers migrated west across the continent, systems of assimilation were created. In response, Indigenous peoples adapted and their agricultural systems were fractured. 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. However, there is a gap in literature that does not depict these agricultural education systems. For this reason, there is a need to explore the current Indigenous agricultural education systems. 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.

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.

After the data collection and analysis, one theme that emerged from the study is related to training the leaders of tomorrow. Each of the Native nations and the College of the Muscogee Nation have focused on the ability to train and develop Indigenous agriculture leaders. 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 positively create Indigenous agriculture leaders. The work performed to create these agriculture leaders are explored within each case. Collectively, each of the cases seek to create agricultural education capacity to train future Indigenous agricultural leaders. These leaders, utilizing the programs within each case, have the ability to create a strong background in food sovereignty, sustainability, and Indigenous agriculture. Training the leaders of tomorrow is a theme that can be seen in each of the four Oklahoma Native nations and the College of the Muscogee Nation.

In addition to the agricultural work presently occurring, the work each case is doing to build future Indigenous agriculturalists plays a significant role for the future of the greater Indigenous communities. The groundwork has been created to support Indigenous specific agricultural education programs that can play a significant role for other Native nations that are seeking to develop their own programs. With the proper groundwork in place, the ability to train the leaders of tomorrow becomes a reality. The existing Indigenous agricultural education programs have created a framework for future programming to develop Indigenous leaders.

While each case views training agricultural leaders a little differently, each have created successful programs. The theme of *Train the leaders of tomorrow* is focused on the ability to train and develop Indigenous agriculture leaders. This theme is a direct quote from the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and spans across all cases. It appears each case has sometimes been a winding road as challenges associated with creating and developing programs are navigated. Today, these programs are highly successful and are situated to positively create Indigenous agriculture leaders. The work performed to create these agriculture leaders are explored within each case.

First, the Quapaw Nation has created diverse agriculture programs. Through these programs, the Quapaw Nation uses their programs for education that promote Indigenous agriculture. The Quapaw Nation support the integration of students interested in learning from their diverse programs. For example, students came from Iowa to learn from the Quapaw Nation. These students, though they were not Indigenous, “really wanted to learn about tribes and what they do and how they do it” (C. Roper, personal communication, November 20, 2020). While the Quapaw Nation seeks to support the development of Indigenous students, they support all students who want to learn from their agriculture programs.

In addition to students learning from the Quapaw Nation’s agriculture facilities, there are efforts to build the individual capacity with students. Roper explains this by stating, “I spent a lot of time with some of those students and some of them that were interested and wanted to learn, that obviously fueled my passion for that and I would spend as much as I needed with those students to find their direction” (Personal communication, November 20, 2020). Through the relationships with students, the Quapaw Nation works on an individual and personal level to support their educational goals. Whether it be an Indigenous student or a non-Indigenous student, the Quapaw Nation seeks to create agriculture leaders that understand and can further Indigenous agriculture initiatives.

Lastly, for the Quapaw Nation, students gain an overarching understanding of Indigenous agriculture. Through the Quapaw Nation’s programs, knowledge is gained in a variety of areas including growing produce, processing meat, land management for cattle and bison, the need for pollinators, and the distribution of food to the Quapaw people. Individually, these programs target one aspect of Indigenous agriculture. Collectively, students gain a broad understanding of food sovereignty and sustainability that is accomplished by a Native nation. The Quapaw Nation has the capacity to create Indigenous agriculturalists to carry out food sovereignty programs for Indigenous peoples.

The next case, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, has developed a program to create successful Indigenous agricultural leaders. In addition to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation program’s livestock initiatives, it also supports leadership initiatives. Since the Agriculture Youth Program is tribally funded, it has the capacity to support initiatives important to the Nation. Leadership opportunities for Muscogee (Creek) Nation youth is an important component supported by the program. Haltom explains the support of leadership activities by saying:

You take a kid, for instance, in FFA and they don’t show anything, it’s just a leadership activity. I like to make sure we buy them an FFA or 4-H jacket. We do that every other year because, I go to a lot of FFA banquets and our Creek kids are always dressed in official dress and look nice and that’s because the tribe helped them” (Personal communication, December 15, 2020).

In this vein, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation supports agricultural leadership by helping youth be actively involved. Additionally, the Nation wants youth to have the opportunity to proudly display this involvement by wearing the 4-H or FFA organization’s official dress. In doing this, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation ensures every student has the opportunity to be involved and further their agriculture goals.

For the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, there is great importance pressed on providing opportunities for youth to engage agriculture through the Agriculture Youth Program. These students have the flexibility to engage livestock and leadership initiatives. The program staff

continues to best meet the needs of their youth, which is evidenced by the expansion of the program to include youth involved in the FFA organization. Through the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's program and continuing efforts to engage youth, Indigenous agriculturalists are being developed to further agriculture initiatives.

The Osage Nation is the next case, which works to facilitate agricultural education within the Nation. From the beginning, education has been integrated into the agriculture programs. For the Osage Nation, this education starts with the Wah-Zha-Zhe Early Learning Academy (WELA) and Daposka Ahnkodapi, which houses the nation's education programs. Through the education facilities, raised bed gardens were constructed to teach Osage children the principles of food production. This early educational opportunity lays the foundation for agricultural concepts at an early age.

In addition to the Osage Nation's work with early education, there has been a dramatic increase in the agriculture infrastructure. This substantial development was in part due to the receipt of CARES federal funds. Since that time, there are now more opportunities for education. George further explains these opportunities:

Obviously prior to these COVID funds and our expansion and everything, it was just funding and just infrastructure out there for them to really see how things work and how they could work. Now, we have a much better kind of platform for them to see and be able to do and that kind of stuff and see how things can actually work. And then it all comes back to participation, how we can get this across to [youth] and how we can capture their imagination, their thoughts and try to introduce it to them in a way that will interest them. (Personal communication, December 11, 2020)

For the Osage Nation, the CARES federal funds provided the infrastructure necessary to bring the Nation forward in terms of agriculture programs. In addition to this infrastructure, there now exists a greater opportunity to educate Osage people in these initiatives. The work currently implemented has the capacity to educate Osage people in the areas of food sovereignty and sustainability. This capacity ultimately creates the opportunity to train future agricultural leaders within the Osage Nation.

The fourth case is the Choctaw Nation, which created an agricultural education program that facilitates the education of Indigenous peoples. In addition to agriculture, agricultural education programs were created to further support the growth of Indigenous peoples. For the Choctaw Nation, it has been important to properly plan for these initiatives. House explains this planning by stating, "Ideas are great, the process of those ideas and making those ideas become reality, you gotta have enough forward thinking to think about all the backside of it" (Personal communication, May 12, 2021). In this instance, House was referring to agriculture initiatives, but this process transcends across the agricultural education component as well. For the Choctaw Nation, the agriculture and agricultural education programs have specific goals to benefit their people.

Within the case of the Choctaw Nation, it is important to create and implement agricultural education programs that lay the groundwork for future Indigenous agriculturalists. Programs that focus on the Choctaw people including Agriculture in the Classroom program for elementary students, livestock show program for youth 3rd grade through 12th grade, Backyard Initiatives for homeowners, and a five-acre demonstration farm. These initiatives establish the agricultural education foundation to support the development of Indigenous agriculturalists. An

example of this foundation is the Choctaw Nation's full-size jersey cow, which demonstrates milking a cow. In regards to the milking demonstration, House states, "I got an email from a mom that sent me awhile back about those programs and how her daughter got to teach kids how to milk a cow and utilize those older kids to help us out and do different functions" (Personal communication, May 12, 2021). Agriculture initiatives have positively laid the foundation for youth and in this case, are influential to program participants. For the Choctaw Nation, training agriculture leaders are important in planning and implementing agricultural education programs.

The fifth case is the College of the Muscogee Nation, which is inherently positioned to create future Indigenous agriculturalists. Through the Associate of Science degree in Natural Resources, students have the opportunity to engage courses that support Indigenous agriculture and agribusiness. This is apparent as the program is designed for "students who are interested in the field of conservation and sustainable agriculture. Students develop knowledge of the elements of the natural environment and aspects of conducting agribusiness" (College of the Muscogee Nation, 2020d, para. 6). In the case of the College of the Muscogee Nation, the institution is established with a firm foundation in creating and training future Indigenous agriculturalists.

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.

Using the established agriculture systems within each case, agricultural education programs were created to support the development of future Indigenous agriculturalists. Each case takes a different approach in agricultural education, but all collectively implement a program that fits their specific goals. For the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and Choctaw Nation, the agricultural education programs are situated strongly in 4-H and FFA curricular foundations. Next, the Quapaw Nation utilizes internship programs in cooperation with universities and other organizations. Additionally, the Osage Nation's agricultural education programs are involved with bringing youth to the Nation's programs and create cultural classes to pass along cultural knowledge to future generations. Lastly, the College of the Muscogee Nation implements agriculture classes that integrate a focus on Indigenous culture. Within each case, educational sovereignty is engaged in ways to promote educational goals within each tribe and train the leaders of tomorrow. Within educational sovereignty, each of the cases developed the most appropriate programs to best meet the needs of their respective Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, it is evident that agricultural education in the four Oklahoma Native nations and the College of the Muscogee Nation is an important component to sustaining Indigenous culture and community. The first agricultural educators in North America were Indigenous peoples. In this light, each Native nation created robust agriculture programs and through those programs, there are educational opportunities to teach Indigenous youth and train them to be successful agriculturalists, as well as future leaders. This study creates a foundation for Indigenous agricultural education that was previously missing in literature. The theme, *Train the leaders of tomorrow*, is the final element that brings all cases together. Collectively, each of the cases seek to create agricultural education capacity to train future Indigenous agricultural leaders. These leaders, utilizing the programs within each case, have the ability to create a

strong background in food sovereignty, sustainability, and Indigenous agriculture. Training the leaders of tomorrow is a theme that can be seen in each of the four Oklahoma Native nations and the College of the Muscogee Nation. All four of the Oklahoma sovereign nations experience many similar situations, both of which are positive and challenging. Despite the unique histories of each Native nation and the different paths that brought them to their current programs, the challenges and successes are similar across nations. The components of success, identified by the themes detailed in the study, are resources, capacity, partnerships, culture, and the willingness to work towards establishing agriculture and agricultural education programs for the benefit of Indigenous peoples. All of these resources come together to create Indigenous agriculture leaders that further the initiatives of Native nations.

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