

**Managing Tribal Assets:
Developing Long Term Strategic Plans**

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Joseph S. Anderson, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Management

and

Dean Howard Smith, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Economics

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Abstract

As Native American tribes move toward self-determination with their governments and self-sufficiency of their peoples, they face daunting problems. Beginning from the status quo of unemployment rates ranging as high as 90%, concomitant social and health issues unseen elsewhere in the U.S., and limited financial assets, tribes need to develop long-term strategic plans. However, traditional economic development models and techniques are of little use in designing these plans. Additionally, some tribes are earning substantial financial assets through gaming operations. Nearly all tribes, however, still face the challenge of using their assets to build vibrant communities after many years of destitution.

To this end, the development of a long-term strategic community development plan is called for. The National Executive Education Program for Native American Leadership (NEEPNAL) in conjunction with the Center for American Indian Economic Development (CAIED) has developed a method for aiding tribes to develop such plans. This paper addresses the multiple, difficult issues surrounding development of an effective long-term strategic planning process for productive uses of tribal assets. Further, the NEEPNAL/CAIED method for overcoming these difficulties is presented, with positive examples from tribal experience.

Managing Tribal Assets: Developing Long Term Strategic Plans*

Introduction

As Native American tribes move toward self-determination with their governments and self-sufficiency of their peoples, they face daunting problems. Beginning from the status quo of unemployment rates ranging as high as 90%, concomitant social and health issues unseen elsewhere in the U.S., and limited financial assets, tribes find need to develop long term strategic plans. However, traditional economic development models and techniques are of little use in designing these plans. The National Executive Education Program for Native American Leadership (NEEPNAL) in conjunction with the Center for American Indian Economic Development (CAIED) has developed a method for aiding tribes to develop such plans. Additionally, some tribes are earning substantial financial assets through gaming operations. Although these funds change one portion of the development equation, the rest of the equation remains the same. These tribes still face the challenge of using their assets to build vibrant communities after many years of destitution. As such, the development of a long-term strategic community development plan is called for.

Traditional economic development tools, such as economic base and location quotients, are of little use in determining the future path of tribal societies for several reasons. First, traditional tools are useful for communities already evidencing sustaining economies; however, when the local economy faces exorbitant unemployment rates, and the vast majority of actual employment occurs in the governmental sector, any initial inventory of the economic base is essentially useless.

Second, the extreme social and health issues typically present lie beyond the scope of the usual economic analysis method. Any long-term development plan needs to address the broad spectrum of community development issues: health, education, substance abuse, crime, and myriad other social issues.

Third, all development projects need to be analyzed from both economic and cultural perspectives. Often, traditional development plans have been mis-directed due to what has been called "the self-reference criterion"; the unconscious reference to one's own cultural values" (Deresky, 1997, page 76). When tribal development plans are conceived externally by members of the dominant culture, no matter how good their intentions, they tend to reflect the beliefs, aspirations, and values of their authors, rather than those espoused by tribal cultures. As tribes approach true self-determination, maintenance and renewal of traditional cultural values are at least as important as simple economic development. In many cases, seemingly profitable projects are deemed highly inappropriate for any number of cultural reasons.

ties requires redress. Further contributing to mistrust of external, federal interference is the striking inconsistency of such interventions over time and across programs. On many reservations, various branches of the federal government, led by the BIA, explicitly and implicitly oversee or control many resources potentially available for development. Additionally, federal responsibilities due treaty obligations need to be accounted for in any long-term strategic plan.

A brief background of Smith (1994a and 1994b), Smith and Ozmun (1994), Cornell and Kalt (1992) is provided to discuss some theoretical issues of developing Native American economies.

Using the theoretical background, the NEEPNAL/CAIED approach to aiding tribes develops long term strategic plans, and extends more traditional economic development analysis. The approach includes extensive interviews and workshops with a wide variety of tribal representatives and tribal members to first develop a vision of where the tribe is at present, where the tribal members feel they want to be in 5, 10, and 20 years. The resulting strategic vision incorporates cultural issues that may impact and be impacted (positively and negatively) by community development. Once an overall vision is developed a menu of interwoven economic, social and cultural projects is developed and presented to tribal representatives.¹

Some final thoughts introduce the process. Morongo Chairperson Andreas (1997) indicates the importance of tribes determining their own goals and strategies since, "no one knows the needs of our people like ourselves." Her goal has been to take tribal "taxusers and making them taxpayers." White Earth Councilperson Vizenor (1997), following Chairperson Andreas, indicated "We are looking for ways to bring our people together with one mind, one spirit and one heart, but it is very difficult since we are so scattered." 5,000 tribal members live on the reservation and 20,000 live off the reservation. Councilperson Vizenor continued by stating, "We need to come to our *own* tribal solutions to solve the problems in our communities." The process described below is a first step toward achieving the goals of these respected leaders.

Theoretical Background

Smith (1994a) provides the basis for the development of interwoven community development plans. Following Jacobs (1984), Smith analyzes a plan put forth by Diamant (1989) for the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. A five-level process is used to grow a sustaining economy. The first level is an initial phase where exports are utilized to earn imports. For gaming tribes, this is the opportunity to earn substantial profits and wages. For other tribes, examples of exports are tourism, agricultural and forest products, mining revenues and royalties, and federal transfers and treaty obligation payments.

The third level is the development of new and improved products. The import replacing process may lead to new technologies, entrepreneurial activity and a reversal of comparative advantages. For the Rosebud Sioux, this could be the expansion of the silviculture and aquaculture enterprises. Following the development of the new and improved products, the fourth level of the Jacobs model is the development of new exports. Then the cycle begins again as the fifth level of the model.

Smith (1994b) extends the Jacobs model by invoking Parsonian social theory to show economic development and cultural integrity as supportive of each other. Parsonian theory views a society as a fabric of intertwining subsystems, which include economic, familial, spiritual, political, environmental and recreational. This global-level system approach disallows the traditional view that individual subsystems can be manipulated alone in development interventions (or "by development planners.") Accordingly, when one subsystem is disrupted due to exogenous change, the remaining subsystems adjust to reach a new compatibility with the alterations in the first. For example, the reservation system drastically altered the economic subsystem of many tribes. Plains tribes who once had profitable economic subsystems based on harvesting buffalo had to adjust to a new economic subsystem based on subsistence level federal transfers. Since the remaining social subsystems were intertwined with the profitable economic subsystem, which was so drastically altered, the result was - and is - a downward spiral of the remaining subsystems. According to Parsonian theory, the new point of compatibility is not necessarily, and in this example certainly is not, an optimal solution from an economic perspective. Rather, the current social ills present on many reservations can be linked directly to the disruption of the economic and political subsystems through the reservation process.

Smith (1994b) shows how the interaction between the various subsystems can lead to improving economies while maintaining and improving the cultural subsystems. For example, increased incomes and profits can provide for language programs. Improved language programs lead to better familiarity with traditional cultural values and improved self-worth and higher graduation rates, which in turn yields an improved workforce, and the cycle spirals upward.

Combining the Jacobs model with Parsonian theory provides the basis for the NEEP/CAIED approach to developing long-term strategic community development plans. The *process* of economic development is combined with the *interaction* between other social subsystems to provide an *integrated* and tribe-specific plan of action.

However, no strategy can be independent of the political process. Cornell and Kalt (1992 and elsewhere) detail the importance of a viable political structure as being tantamount to economic development. Invoking Parsonian theory here, Cornell and Kalt explain the linkages between the cultural, political and economic subsystems. On the

usually IRA, political processes. If the governance structure closely matches the underlying culture of the tribe, then there is a chance for success; however, when the mandated structure conflicts with the underlying cultural values, the political leaders have no legitimization, so failure looms. If the political process is failing, then according to Cornell and Kalt, the economic subsystem is also likely to fail.

The current authors are not governance experts. As such, the strategic planning process described herein does not discuss political renovations; rather, the process works within the existing political structure. If severe problems with the governance structure become apparent during the investigation, then these can be addressed in other venues.

Community Development: An Integrated Approach

For simplicity sake, the community makeup can be analyzed from six perspectives: economic, political, educational, social, cultural, and financial. This section discusses these in turn.

The Economic Subsystem

Following Parsonian theory, as detailed in Smith (1994b), economic activity development cannot be analyzed in isolation. Instead, as will become clear, economic activity is best addressed last in the process! This may seem contradictory, since the most pressing issues for reservation communities are the lack of jobs and income. But the downward spiral of the overall society during the extended, subsistence-level reservation period presents challenges more complex than merely attracting jobs to the reservations.

Economic activity is simply a means to the end of creating a healthy, vibrant community. As such, various options need to be compared. Three potentially competing outcomes are desired: an increased number of jobs, increased personal income levels and increased tribal revenues via economic profits. To further complicate the issue, the term profitability must be viewed from a global community perspective instead of solely an economic one.

All economic activities undertaken require a promise of profitability. Scarce resources cannot be devoted to job creation, for instance, if the enterprise does not show the prospect of sustainability. However, the concept of sustainability differs from a GAAP oriented, income statement.

Consider a tribe currently spending \$50,000 on various social welfare expenses. A projected tribal enterprise will provide employment for the people receiving the tribal transfers. but will result in an accounting loss of \$10,000. Keeping the example simplis-

employing 50 people at \$5 per hour. The agricultural enterprise will be sustaining, but will not provide substantial profit for the tribal coffers. The second enterprise is a capital-intensive manufacturing enterprise. After training, 10 people will be able to earn \$20 per hour. This wage will be necessary to avoid "brain drain" of the newly trained tribal members to border towns. Like the agricultural enterprise, the manufacturing plant will be sustaining, but not particularly profitable. The third enterprise is a middle ground from an employment perspective, say 25 employees earning \$8 per hour. The third enterprise is a strong export business, such as gaming, and will earn the tribe substantial profits.

Developing a long-term strategic plan involves identifying the specifics of these three potential enterprises. However, the final decision *cannot* be identified from a simple economic or accounting perspective. Rather, the overall vision of the tribe in conjunction with the other subsystems has to be analyzed, and then only the tribal leadership can make the final decision.

The Political Subsystem

The governance structure of the local community dictates the direction of development planning. As discussed above, reorganization of the governance structure is beyond the scope of the activities discussed in this paper. However, the existing structure has to be known. For example, some tribes support private entrepreneurial activity by providing site leases or other methods. On other reservations, the main focus is on tribal enterprises². Some tribes have strong separation between economic and political activities, but others do not. These issues, well discussed in Cornell and Kalt (1992), help direct the focus of the strategic planning process.

The Educational Subsystem

Obviously, the viability of a long-term strategic plan rests on the future work force and social conditions. Therefore, an analysis of the educational system is imperative. Some reservations have BIA schools, others have 638 contract schools and yet others use border town schools. The quality of the educational experience differs widely among these schools. The quality of the educational experience includes both the traditional skills orientation and cultural sensitivity. Focus in education varies significantly between emphasis on dominant-culture language and skills and traditional tribal languages and skills. Language and cultural programs feed into the other social subsystems.

Scholarship programs can be tailor-made to match the future needs of the tribe. Given limited resources, a tribe may set up the scholarship program to favor particular skills such as range management or horticulture. For many years, law school has been

the current situation and designing programs for the future are important aspects of the long-term strategic plan.

For example, Smith and Ozmun (1994) discuss a plan by the Fort Belknap Indian Community based on a substance abuse center. The focus was determined by the designation by the tribal council of unemployment and substance abuse as the two most pressing issues on the reservation. Combining employment with a substance abuse program and the criminal justice system led to an integrated plan of action.

Other examples include identifying the lack of day care opportunities as a major deterrent to employment, a community clean-up competition, expanding the health facility, sponsoring a tribal softball team and the like. A healthy and vibrant community requires more than just jobs. As such, identifying and addressing social issues is an important portion of any strategic plan.

The Cultural Subsystem

The guiding force for all aspects of the strategic plan is the specific culture of the people. A plan for the Hualapai people may be very different from one for the Ogalala Sioux people - even if they traded reservations. Since the purpose of any strategic plan is to improve the community and lives of the local population, all aspects of the resultant plan must be suitable for and *guided by* the cultural subsystem.

Culture is the way of living developed and transmitted by a group of people to subsequent generations (Harris & Moran, 1991). Included in culture are artifacts, beliefs, ethics, moral and other values, and underlying assumptions that allow people to make sense of themselves and their environment. Culture is, as Geert Hofstede has said "the software of the human mind" (Hofstede, 1992, page 12). As such, the cultural subsystem may be the most complex and difficult to analyze. Outside consultants, such as the authors, may not be privy to many important aspects of the tribal culture. Certain taboos may not be broached, certain concerns may not be voiced, even certain names may not be spoken regardless of how extensive the interview process. It may take an extended time period for outside consultants to earn the confidence of people, and even then the outsider may not understand the subtleties of certain cultural mores. These problems are exacerbated when more than one tribe is represented on a reservation, such as Fort Belknap or Colorado River Indian Tribes³. For these reasons, the process described below does not dictate or prescribe any plan of action. The final analysis can only be completed by the tribal leadership.

Awareness of the cultural subsystem guides the process. Identifying certain sacred sites is vital. Certain cultural taboos make various types of activity objectionable on the surface. For example, if mining is viewed as a desecration of Mother Earth, then there is no point investing time and effort toward investigating mineral deposit potential.

sharing oral traditions. Developing suitable arts and crafts programs can sustain and expand cultural traditions. Artifacts, as the tangible examples of traditional culture, enhance interest in the less tangible cultural dimensions; the stories, legends, beliefs and values of the tribe. Revitalizing traditional feast days and ceremonies can also become a tribal activity⁴.

The Financial Subsystem

Advancement of the previously discussed subsystems requires financial assets. Investment in tribal enterprises, a tribal loan program for entrepreneurs, language programs, community clean-up days and the like require financial resources. Since most tribal members have few financial assets, these must come from the tribal coffers either through direct investment or via debt obligations.

For obvious reasons, many tribes will be wary about letting outside consultants have specific information concerning tribal finances. *This need not be a deterrent to successfully developing a plan.* The process described below has been successfully employed by NEEP/NAL/CAIED staff having only rudimentary knowledge of tribal finances. Since the final decisions and actions are made by the tribal leadership, specific financial information is not necessary in developing the menu of opportunities.

Once again, this subsystem is a two-sided coin. Apart from working within the existing structure, the strategic plan needs to incorporate development opportunities. For example, an opportunity might exist for a micro-lending program for entrepreneurs to finance inventories or equipment repair. On a larger scale, a program might be arranged between the tribe and a financial institution circumventing the collateral and jurisdictional issues, thereby allowing tribal members to obtain larger loans.

Summary

Viewing the community development process through the lens of Parsonian theory allows for an integrated approach. Using a simplistic listing of the economic, political, educational, social, cultural and financial subsystems provides for a better understanding of the overall community. The existing situation must be understood and then development options can be introduced into the plan.

Recognizing the interactions between the subsystems is vitally important. Building a vendor village for the sale of arts and crafts to tourists may look profitable from an economic perspective. The expansion of the arts and crafts manufacturing sector may be important within a cultural perspective since traditional methods can be handed down from the elders to the youth. The potential income from the sale of arts and crafts items may be seen as leading to renewed self-image and thereby reducing many social ills such as substance abuse. So on many levels, an investment in a ven-

Obviously, since each reservation community is unique, there is no "one-size-fits-all" strategy - either for the process or for the end result.

Interviews

The most important undertaking within the overall process is that of interviewing. This is particularly important for outside consultants. The interviews need to have an overall structure, but must also be very freeform in nature. It should also be expected that some people will have to be interviewed recursively. The interviews should be conducted in person at a location where the interviewee is comfortable. For instance, do not bring a high school student into the tribal chairperson's office! The time schedule should be loose enough to allow an expected half-hour interview to last an hour or more.

Having been invited to begin a strategic plan, the analyst should expect to spend several hours discussing initial ideas with the tribal representative in charge of the plan⁵. This may be the tribal planner or a council member. Beginning with broad strokes, focus on the current problems and projects. It is essential to determine the existing situation and plans. A good starting point is the OEDP. This will include at least a partial listing of existing and planned economic activity.

As the details emerge, focus on individual enterprises or activities. For the most part, the initial focus will be on economic activity. It is suggested that a tour of the reservation and selected facilities be made⁶. Since this is the lead person representing the tribe, she/he will also have strong ideas concerning directions for future activities. For example, a vendor village may be one idea. Once an initial understanding of the current situation and possible future activities is garnered, a series of interviews should be scheduled with other individuals.

Although it may not be necessary or possible to meet all council members, this may be requested by the council members themselves. As mentioned, understanding the political climate is important. If it becomes clear that distinct factions exist on the council or within the tribal population, it is important to get all sides of the story. Council members can provide vital information on legal and intergovernmental issues and relationships.

Program administrators are other important sources of information. Whereas, council members have a political perspective, administrators have a "front-line" vantage point. Possible interviews include: the directors of the education, health, fish and wildlife and other programs, the police chief, the tribal archeologist, the director of the museum, and the managers of tribal enterprises. It should be expected that issues overlooked or ignored by the council members are vitally important to these people.

Moving to the other end of the demographic spectrum, interviewing various youth is suggested. College students and high school students provide a different perspective. The school and tribal library are locations to meet students.

As the interviews progress, certain names may become familiar or suggestions may be made. The interviews can include randomly selected ordinary private citizens: people who work both on and off the reservation, single mothers, and parents at a basketball game are examples. These are the people for whom the strategic plan is being developed, who live on the reservation, and face day to day issues. Their inclusion is vital to the general success of any development plan.

Regardless of who is being interviewed, a rough structure should be followed based on four simple questions. First, what is good about the reservation today? Second, what is wrong with the reservation today? Third, what would you like to see on the reservation in 5, 10, and 20 years? Lastly, what would you *not* like to see in 5, 10, and 20 years? The last question is very important from a cultural perspective, since the answers may point toward previously unknown taboos.

Depending on the circumstances of the planning process, such as travel, the interviews will take several days and may occur over the span of several weeks. As mentioned, the interviews may be recursive in that some people may be interviewed repeatedly.

Although copious notes should be made during the interview process, the final report does not indicate the specific sources of any information. An assurance of a level of anonymity allows the interviewees to be more forthright. This is especially important in small communities where sometimes merely stating the minor details of an interview can identify the interviewee to other members of the tribal community.

Secondary Research

Obviously, one phase of the project involves secondary research. From U.S. Census data to tribal reports to anthropological studies, this secondary research should be as exhaustive as possible. For example, one of the authors researched soil salinization for one strategic plan.⁷

Fortunately, though for unfortunate motives, most reservations have been studied extensively in terms of natural resources. Other information may be more problematic. The fuzziness of unemployment rates on reservations is a good example of the latter. For the very reasons why processes like economic base and location quotient studies are not feasible, the process described herein is only loosely scientific in nature, but the more hard data one can obtain, the better the resulting understanding of the existing circumstances and the potentials for development.

plan of action. The purpose of the examples, which are developed from the previous research, is not to dictate which imports must be replaced. Rather, the use of examples is to allow the audience to focus on the *process* of economic development.

Once the formal presentation is completed, the staff facilitates an open discussion based on the same four basic questions used in the interviews. This may be the very first time the director of the education program, the director of the museum and the police chief discuss strategic issues instead of specific problems. When possible, one staff member facilitates the discussion and a second records the thoughts and ideas on the flipchart tablet.

Other topics are garnered from the previous interviews. These may include mention of various sacred sites needing protection or the success of the language program in the elementary school.

This record of the discussion is then added to the previous research notes and data for further analysis. It also becomes a permanent record of the event, and a transcription should be included in the report as an appendix.

Apart from the main purpose for the workshop, a secondary benefit may obtain. A regular formal strategic planning session may become part of the tribal schedule. Say on a quarterly basis, a similar meeting can be held to focus on the larger issues.

Creating the Vision

Following a second round of interviews, the workshop and completion of the secondary research a vision for the future needs to be formulated. This statement must be realistic yet optimistic.

Beginning with the initial conditions and based on the various answers to future-focused interview questions, the information has to be distilled into a straightforward brief vision statement for the tribe. The vision statement needs to include accomplishments: reduction of the high school dropout and unemployment rates to less than half the current rates are specific examples. The vision statement should be inclusive of the various subsystems discussed above - without being overly technical or academic.

The vision statement sets reasonable, though optimistic, targets for the development of the strategic plan. In mathematical terms, it sets the terminal conditions. The planning process then becomes a complex optimal control problem: given the initial and terminal conditions what strategies will take the tribe from one to the other.

After an initial draft of the vision statement is completed, it should be reviewed by several tribal representatives for final input and possible modification.

In a purposely randomized order, each of the possible projects within a category on the list is discussed in the report. Unless it is obvious, no normative recommendations are included in the report. Instead the benefits, potential problems, and conflicts and interactions with other projects are discussed. The last issue is of vital importance since the integration of the several subsystems is the driving force behind the strategic plan. As discussed above, leaving out one piece of the puzzle may lead to failure.

The detailed report should read like a menu. Some projects may be mutually exclusive for financial or other reasons and others complement each other. The linkages should be indicated. Once the report is completed it is forwarded to the tribal council or representative for further action.

Conclusions

The process described herein has been successfully, at least seemingly so, completed for various NEEPNAL/CAIED partner tribes. Having received the finished report, the tribal governments then determine which projects to pursue. At this point detailed business plans are developed for the economic activities to evaluate the specific feasibility of said project. Similar plans and budgets are prepared for the non-business activities. Then the process moves to the action phase where the selected projects are actually undertaken.

The end result of the strategic planning process is therefore only an initial step on the path toward self-sufficiency and self-determination, but it is a vital step. In order to take this step, the tribal community must be looking forward and ready to take the risks necessary to reach into the future. Creating the vision of what that future may hold is more important, perhaps, than detailing the specific activities to undertake. The economic, community, cultural and other endeavors within the body of the plan are simply the means to the end of reaching the vision of the people.

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Endnotes

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¹ This paper details the methods used by NEEP/CAIED staff to help tribes develop long term strategic community development plans. The paper is necessarily only a general template for other tribes to follow on their own. The generality is necessary for two reasons. First, previous client tribes can only provide simple examples due to the proprietary nature of the work completed. Second, since every reservation is different culturally, politically and economically, most of the work has to be tailored to fit the reservation. However, the general paradigm and technique can - and have been - applied to a wide variety of reservations.

² Cornell and Kalt (1992) discuss the compatibility between enterprise form, governance structure and the underlying culture.

³ Assiniboine and Gros Ventre, and Chemehuevi, Mohave, Hopi and Navajo respectively.

⁴ See Smith 1994b for details on how the cultural aspects can work hand-in-hand with economic development.

⁵ Be aware the lead representative is likely to have other duties besides being interviewed for two days.

⁶ Have the tribal representative drive to facilitate note taking.

⁷ The authors thank Lowell C. McEwen from Colorado State University for his help on