

Entrepreneurial Product of the Month

Indianpreneurship Curriculum,

produced by ONABEN, A Native American Business Network

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Cultural Approach to Building Native American Businesses

Lynn “Bear” Robertson grew up in the woods, gathering ferns and moss with his mother, a Grand Ronde tribe member. Later he worked with his father’s logging company, learning how to take down trees with precision and grace.

Carrying with him his cultural legacy, Robertson founded Spirit of the Bear, a wildfire and general forestry contracting business in McMinville, Oregon. Started in 2003, this small business focuses on forest management and firefighting, using sustainable practices.

Robertson is a successful entrepreneur by any count, but especially in his tribe.

“The Robertsons’ business is a metaphor for our mission, for what we mean when we talk about private enterprise in Indian Country,” said Tom Hampson, executive director of ONABEN, a Native American entrepreneurial support and education group.

ONABEN’s latest project to boost Native American businesses involves a curriculum designed specifically for Native Americans, called *Indianpreneurship: A Native American Journey into Business*.

***Indianpreneurship*: Free Enterprise in Indian Country**

The four tribes who founded ONABEN in 1991 thought it was essential to create a stronger private sector on Native American reservations.

“There was a recognition by one of the founders that it is fine to have the tribe develop enterprises, but then you just have everyone working for the tribe,” Hampson said. “There is a need for a diversity of approaches and a free enterprise system with more entrepreneurs.”

While gaming and casinos have brought jobs and income to many tribes in the Pacific Northwest, Hampson said there’s still room— and a need— for successful small businesses.

“We discovered that in distressed communities such as some of the Native American reservations, the whole notion of creating self-income generated out of creativity is really a socially significant development,” Hampson said. “Our role is to bring the marketplace to Native Americans and bring them to the marketplace.”

For 16 years, ONABEN has been providing business training and support to Native clients. But three years ago, they realized the business training curriculum they were using was not culturally appropriate.

“Before we embarked on this project, we had been using an assortment of training materials,” Hampson said, “but we lacked a comprehensive curriculum that met the needs and reflected the experiences of our Native students – so we created it.”

With funding from a variety of public and private sources, including tribal entities, *Indianpreneurship* differs from other small business training materials in that it is story-based, using Native American business experiences as a basis for illustrating business principles.

ONABEN collaborated with a team of small business experts to research, write and test working versions at tribal small business development centers part of the ONABEN network.

Both Native and non-Native business experts joined the team to set parameters and make a case-study based module

“We created stories of Native people that face challenges and overcome them,” Hampson said, adding that the stories were based on real people. “We want our students to identify with the lives and stories in our curriculum as well as be encouraged and inspired to follow their own small business dreams.”

For example, the opening story presents students with a case study of a woman named Jasmine, who was raised on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Her grandmother taught her intricate basket weaving, and she was contemplating quitting her job at a casino to start a business making baskets for an art market. Discussion questions examine Jasmine’s choices, priorities, knowledge and potential. On subsequent pages, participants are invited to write down their personal values, goals and skills. When the business plan is introduced in the curriculum, it’s called “Your Story.”

As the curriculum was being shaped, team leaders had to face the issue of what is culturally appropriate.

“Because of the huge spectrum of differences among tribal groups who would be using the curriculum, we discovered it wasn’t our question to answer what was culturally appropriate, but to present ideas and let the students decide,” Hampson said.

Hampson and his team presented a broad spectrum of Native ideas and images. For example, they hired a graphic artist who specializes in Native art, asking her to create images that represent the ancestors of many tribes. They also made sure not to use sacred symbols in a secular way.

Scattered throughout the book are renderings of cave drawings, reminiscent of the very first Native Americans. Students and teachers see images of strong societies and their stories told in simple carving. Current photographs also play a large part in shaping the overall tone of the curriculum.

For example, the curriculum opens at Session I with beautiful pictures of a Native American man kneeling by a wooden vessel, hewed by his own hands, under the title, “The Journey Begins.” Session 5, “Getting Ready for Market,” portrays Native American women drying fish next to a fire. The photograph for “The Quest for Order” section, Session 7, depicts a peaceful sky and pink sunset. The images convey the strength and dignity of various tribes with a mixture of black and white backgrounds and subtle colors.

The curriculum was unveiled at ONABEN’s annual conference in 2005. Since then, the curriculum has been adopted for use in fourteen tribal entrepreneurial training in five states. Hampson said they have sold 165 student editions and 30 teacher editions to about 20 sites throughout the country with gross revenues at \$24,000.

“And all of this happened by word of mouth,” Hampson said.

Businesses represented at *Indianpreneurship* courses run the gamut from artists and crafts people to natural resource businesses and small retail outlets. But most businesses are small and local “mom and pop” ventures, Hampson said.

In the Warm Springs nation of Oregon, for example, the tribe sponsored a workshop on value-added forestry, using the *Indianpreneurship* curriculum.

On the Columbia River in Oregon, a group of Native students learned about value-added potential in salmon fishing. One Native student now runs a successful business doing specialty salmon products for farmers markets.

Many clients are artists and craftspeople, producing Native beadwork, basket-making and other arts handed down from generations.

The Montana Experience

In Big Sky Country, Philip Belangie, of the Montana Department of Commerce, said *Indianpreneurship* is a welcome addition to their business training portfolio.

“What we really like about this curriculum is the way they look at starting a business,” Belangie said. “They talk about visioning and describing a vision, and they do it in an Indian sort of way. It’s very personal and concrete.”

Montana has seven Indian reservations with at least four different language groups, including tribes on the Blackfeet, Crow, Flathead, Fort Belknap, Fort Peck, Little Shell of Chippewa, Northern Cheyenne and Rocky Boy reservations.

As of mid-January 2007, 68 participants have graduated or are currently attending *Indianpreneurship* courses.

In addition to \$24,000 to stage the *Indianpreneurship* courses, the state of Montana has designated \$70,000 in an Indianpreneur Equity Fund to be used by Native Americans located on or adjacent to Reservations. As another incentive for the *Indianpreneurship* course classroom participants, each program has been awarded \$500 for the winner of a business plan contest conducted by the organization sponsoring the course.

Belangie said Indian entrepreneurs face many challenges, including a lack of funding and equity to get started. Also, he added there is no uniform commercial code on Indian reservations, making it difficult to start a business. And getting a loan on reservations is very difficult.

“Many Indians have no credit or bad credit,” Belangie said. “And it’s very difficult to get a loan.”

There have been success stories, such as 2006 SBA Minority Small Business Persons of the Year, Joseph and Rose Bremner. The Bremners began their business venture nine years ago with a dream and \$10,000 in inventory, but since then sales have increased 300 percent in their Variety Dollar Store in Browning, Montana. The Bremners are committed to economic development on the Blackfeet Reservation and in their community.

Hampson hopes that *Indianpreneurship* will get broader play in a wider market. Right now, the curriculum is being changed gradually as evaluations dictate.

In the fall of 2006, Harvard’s Kennedy School recognized ONABEN at the 5th Annual Honoring Nations Awards Ceremony, a program that recognizes innovation and excellence in American Indian tribal governance.

Hampson plans to publish a series of instructors’ newsletters to exchange ideas as well as create an instructors list serve.

And fundraising is in full gear for *Indianpreneurship II*, which will build on the first module and add new features such as video vignettes.

“It’s leading us in a lot of new paths, which is really the way entrepreneurship works,” Hampson said.

Hampson said they are putting together an alumni program of business owners who have completed the course so they can share ideas and tackle problems together.

ONABEN will also do teacher certification and training and continue to encourage tribal governments to invest in entrepreneurship as an economic development tool.

“Some tribes do maintain a small business center,” Hampson said. “It’s important because they help people on an ongoing basis and we can provide content for them.”

Hampson added that ONABEN will also invest in youth entrepreneurship programs in the future.

-By Lisa Bauer, January 2007

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