



## ***Cherokee Nation Enterprises: Supporting Education and Economic Growth***

by Gael Hancock

It was the fall of 2002 and Cherokee Nation Enterprises (CNE) needed a workforce and management team skilled in the areas of hotel management, gaming, food and beverage management and tourism. Cherokee Nation (CN) tribal leaders, working with Principal Chief Chad Smith, made a commitment to create and fund educational opportunities to ensure employment, advancement and success for the Cherokee citizens.

Just nine months later, in Fall 2003, a cohort of 14 CN and CNE employees entered the Master's of Hospitality Administration (MHA) degree program at the William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV). But they weren't taking classes online, the way the classes had been traditionally offered – they were participating in regular, on-campus classrooms with Hotel Administration master's students via a large-screen television in the back of the room. Using a compressed video format, students in Oklahoma and Nevada could make presentations, ask and answer questions, and see and hear the other students and the professor. In that nine-month time frame, equipment had been installed, an agreement reached, teachers trained to use the video equipment, and students admitted.

Cherokee Nation's Education Leadership Team had a vision of live instruction using compressed video. Ultimately CN chose the Harrah Hotel College because of its worldwide reputation for hospitality programs and innovative thinking. Dean Stuart Mann at the Harrah Hotel College worked with the CN team to develop what became a new endeavor for both organizations. Together they wrote a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that covered many details including the way classes would be offered (compressed video), the fees for each student, and the number of courses the university would make available each semester. The MOU also addressed a non-revocable gift to UNLV from CNE to outfit one distance education classroom and addressed the fact that the Harrah Hotel College would be responsible for maintaining the equipment after installation.

The MHA program was chosen for the CNE/CN students for several reasons. First, it was originally created as an executive degree where classes could be offered in a variety of ways including online, off-campus in remote locations, through new technologies, etc. Also, the program didn't require the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or the Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT) for admittance so students could move quickly into the program. Finally, it was a 30-credit program rather than a 36-credit program like the on-campus master's, and the Cherokee students could finish in two and a half years, taking two courses per semester.

Working through the program details required hundreds of phone calls, many face-to-face meetings, and support from

distance education specialists to technicians. Doyle Paden, education and staff development manager for CNE at the time, and Ed Polivka, director of outreach at the Harrah Hotel College, were key players in the process.

As the details of the memorandum were worked out, the compressed video classrooms were outfitted – one at UNLV, and two in Oklahoma, in Catoosa and Tahlequah. A dedicated T1 line was secured for transmission from the Nevada System of Higher Education's network to the Oklahoma locations. Purchases included routers, speakers, cabling, Polycom camera equipment, televisions and microphones.

The installation at the university was accomplished with the help of representatives from the Office of Information Technology and Distance Education with help from a team of people at CNE, including Paden and Information Technology Department staff members. The Cherokee Nation had two existing video classrooms, but equipment was upgraded and a change was made from Tanberg to Polycom equipment to ensure compatibility with the new UNLV system.

In addition to the classroom lectures, student learning was supported by WebCampus, an online classroom content manager. After logging in, students had access to the course syllabus and other materials and could communicate using dedicated email and discussion board systems. Textbooks and other materials were ordered by CNE from the university bookstore.

Because of the complexity of the equipment, there was a steep learning curve for professors teaching in the new classroom. A professor had to be able to teach his or her subject, remember to stay in the range of the camera and microphone, and be able to switch back and forth between cameras as students asked questions from one or the other of the remote locations. An upgrade to the equipment about two years into the program made this process much easier as voice-activated cameras in the Oklahoma locations eliminated the need for manual switching. Students in Oklahoma also had to learn how to use the equipment.

Paden was responsible for finding students to participate in the program. To be eligible, one had to be an employee of either CNE or CN and have an undergraduate degree. He called the process "outreach" and used every communication tool he had available – from fliers to check-stuffers to a local Tahlequah radio station that had a daily Cherokee-oriented program. His goal was to help support and grow leaders for CNE. "I looked for three things in a possible student – commitment, service and potential for growth," said Paden. Students admitted into the program were subject to all academic standards and other policies of the university and all fees and materials were paid for by CNE.

As of May 2009, 15 Cherokee Nation citizens will have graduated with a Master's of Hospitality Administration degree

from the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Approximately eight Cherokee students were admitted and had the benefit of one or more classes, but did not complete for a myriad of reasons, including running for tribal council, which precluded one from being a tribal employee.

There were incredible benefits for both the students in Oklahoma and Las Vegas. Cherokee students met and worked with peers from around the world in class and online. They had access to the wealth of research material available online through the UNLV library. Each graduate traveled to Las Vegas to present his or her professional paper first to faculty members and other students prior to the graduation ceremony.

One day, an on-campus student from India asked a classmate, "What exactly is 'Indian Gaming?'" He kept hearing the term in class, but was totally unfamiliar with the history of the United States, its tribal sovereign nation status, and the gaming regulations throughout the country. He received a quick history lesson that he might not have had otherwise.

Of course, not everything went smoothly. Often the equipment wasn't working: Las Vegas might be able to hear Catoosa, but not Tahlequah; neither of the Oklahoma locations could see those in Las Vegas; or there was some other configuration of equipment failure. But professors learned the system, technicians were made available during classes and these issues became less of a challenge.

The weather conditions were also a trial. There was more than one night when students in Oklahoma were besieged by tornadoes, hail or ice storms while the students in Las Vegas experienced cloudless skies. One night the students in Catoosa, crouched under a table in the classroom, alerted the students in Tahlequah via the video system that a tornado was on the way.

Four of the graduates of the program have already earned promotions due in part to their new degrees. Stefanie Meeder was promoted to a management position in the hotel and then promoted to human resources manager of a satellite CNE property. Brandon Hill was promoted to surveillance manager. Tiffani Reevis was promoted to food and beverage analyst, and Jeff Pletcher was promoted to casino property host manager.

Today, CNE is participating in a program developed for them at Oklahoma State University with five students currently enrolled. In addition, there are more than 300 CNE/CN employees and citizens participating in the education reimbursement plan. Education is a permanent factor in the Cherokee Nation's formula for success. ♣

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