

College: Northern New Mexico Community College

Location: El Rito, New Mexico

Practice: Fiber Arts Program

Ensuring the future of fiber arts indigenous to northern New Mexico and southern Colorado

Year Started 1990

Budget Averages \$48,000 per year (faculty salaries included)

Program Participants 700

College FTE 15

Target Sector Weaving and woven arts

Staff Size 1 FT; 2 PT

Structure Instructional program within the college curriculum

Key Outcomes Established and supports cottage weaving industry in rural Northern New Mexico
Raised both skill and fee levels for area artists

Introduction

The ancient artisans of New Mexico originally wove colorful wool rugs and blankets because they desired warmth and protection from the elements. As weavers gained more skill, the materials produced became an extension of nature itself; within each design, it is possible to see the gentle patterns of the wind, the endless expanse of the sky, and the elegant austerity of the mountains.

This legacy of the land and loom is nearly 2,500 years old. It continues to evolve through the interwoven history of the Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo settlers—all of whom have made distinct contributions to the culture. Today, thanks to the Fiber Arts Program at Northern New Mexico Community College’s El Rito campus, a new generation of artists is learning to carry on the ancient tradition, providing themselves with an

additional source of income and economic opportunity in the process.

Community Background

Very rural and occupied mostly by Hispanic residents, El Rito, New Mexico is a picturesque farming village established in the eighteenth century. Located in the mountains and surrounded by Carson National Forest, the town is remote and isolated.

Though the terrain surrounding the town is striking, the economy is not strong. Household incomes are below the national average, and poverty and unemployment rates are higher than in most communities across New Mexico and the United States. Forestry remains the dominant industry in the region, though a number of residents

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Entrepreneurship	Yes	Distressed	4	6.9	55	General

Service Area Rio Arriba County

<i>Total Population</i>	<i>38,000</i>
<i>Median Household Income</i>	<i>\$21,000</i>
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	<i>25.3</i>
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	<i>15.2</i>
<i>% Minority Population</i>	<i>89.0</i>
<i>% Rural Population 7</i>	<i>6.3</i>
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	<i>65.9</i>
<i>% College Graduates</i>	<i>10.3</i>

work for the National Labs in Los Alamos or for the state government in Santa Fe.

Program Description

Northern New Mexico Community College (NNMCC) is a public community college, founded in 1909 as the Spanish American Normal School. In 1977, NNMCC became New Mexico's first designated community college. In addition to the historic campus in El Rito, a larger campus is located 30-minutes south of El Rito in Española, a town of about 32,000. Together, the campuses of NNMCC have an enrollment of more than 4,000 students a year, with 45 full-time and 160 part-time faculty members who provide instruction in nearly 70 associate degree and certificate programs.

The Fiber Arts Program began at El Rito in the early 1930s. It trained students to weave in the colorful and expressive Rio Grande style, which was introduced to the region in the late sixteenth century with the arrival of the rugged churro sheep and the horizontal treadle loom. After WWII, the program became inactive and remained so for more than 40 years, until its re-creation in 1990.

The re-establishment of the program was due in large part to a grassroots effort of weavers throughout the community who saw a good opportunity to create a cottage industry in the region. Interest in a weaving program was high, and a number of sheepherders in the area offered to donate the necessary wool.

The goals of the Fiber Arts Program are to ensure that the indigenous Rio Grande weaving style is kept alive and that students will be able to successfully pursue a vocation in weaving. While

the program does not target a specific population and maintains an open admission policy, it tends to draw older, retired students interested in learning to weave. Organizers hope to attract indigenous audiences who have been exposed to the traditions of weaving, but have never undertaken the process.

Course offerings include loom construction, fundamentals of textile weaving, color and design, history of textiles, spinning, and natural dyeing. More advanced courses range from basketry, tapestry weaving, rug restoration, four-harness loom techniques, weaving practicum, rag rugs, marketing, and clothing as a wearable art. The curriculum is rounded out by a series of guest lecturers, special workshops, and field trips to regional auctions and trading posts. The college offers an associate of applied science degree in fiber arts and a certificate in weaving.

As for teaching resources, more than 30 looms are available for practical instruction from faculty members selected for both their accomplishments and teaching ability.

The program has no major funding partners and is supported solely by NNMCC institutional funds. The yearly budget averages about \$48,000, including faculty salaries. The college is, however, a charter member of the Rural Community College Initiative that has received support from the Ford Foundation to develop its capacity to strengthen local economies.

Outcomes

Students of the program have been able to sell products made in their homes, allowing them to supplement retirement income or earn an income while caring for family. Because students must take a course in which they construct their own loom, they leave the program with the ability to continue production in their homes, enabling them to set up home studios and revitalize a cottage industry that was once an integral part of Northern New Mexico's economy.

The popularity of the craft has grown, as evidenced by increasing demand for the products at Santa Fe's annual Spanish Market and elsewhere. That increased demand has, in turn, raised prices and led to even further interest in the program and the craft. Indeed, traditional weaving guilds have begun to form once more in the community.

Finally, there is a renewed sense of community

pride in El Rito, and an increased awareness of traditional Hispanic weaving in New Mexico.

Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability

The program is helping to revitalize an indigenous art form that was in the process of being lost. There are a number of weaving programs in New Mexico, but the program at El Rito is known for the caliber of its instructors and participants, as well as the amount of community support it receives. All resources used in the weaving program are indigenous to New Mexico; the dyes, herbs, and flowers used are all natural and readily available to all members of the community.

The main challenge facing the program continues to be funding. One member of the community mentioned a need for additional scholarship funds for local Hispanic residents.

The program has been able to help residents of the smaller communities of Northern New Mexico by sending the director to demonstrate the techniques, display the products, and show how to set up the looms. By taking the time to teach these skills to those in communities that cannot get to El Rito, the reach and replicability of the NNMCC program has been greatly expanded.

For more information, contact:

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