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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives report from Western New Mexico University

WINDOW ROCK – Last Wednesday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received a report from Western New Mexico University regarding the Navajo student population and a proposed language institute at the college.

WNMU president Dr. Joseph Shepard said the University is in the process of developing a language institute that would incorporate cultural sensitivity and input from Navajo educators and leaders. WNMU has an extended campus located in Gallup, N.M. with a large Navajo student population.

“I don’t want to be a non-Native University president who turns a blind eye to Navajo culture. I understand that one of the main things about Navajo [people] is the language, and I am looking into resources to hopefully bring that program to our university – the tribe can help us,” said Dr. Shepard.

He said being bilingual is more than speaking the language, but it is an entire culture so it would be important to establish a partnership with the Navajo Nation. In conjunction with a language program, WNMU has a Native American Center that provides resources for Native American students and is in the process of adding additional services such as student organizations.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) said he would like to see what aspects will be implemented and how would they make the language program successful.

“I think the Navajo language program should be available and taught at colleges where many of our Navajo students attend, like WNMU. If we can make that available everywhere across the U.S., then that would be great. I come across so many people who want to learn our language, even non-Navajo people and they should have access to learning Diné Bizaad,” said Delegate Brown.

He added that it would be beneficial for HEHSC members to tour the university and get further insight into the programs offered at WNMU, which would aid the university in developing the language program.

EHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) said it was important to foster a relationship between the Navajo Nation and WNMU for decades to come to address issues that some Navajo students are currently facing.

“We tend to have situations of disagreements. I would rather have a conversation happen here than spill over there. Students from WNMU were saying they were being expelled, or had issues with financial aid,” said Delegate Hale. “I am glad we can meet today and get the ball rolling on possible solutions.”

Dr. Shepard said he is aware of the students’ concerns and will meet with them to understand their situations so they may succeed at WNMU and continue their educational goals.

“I come to you as the University president, but I come to you first as an educator. What matters to me is that we provide opportunities to everyone – to grow in their education. I got into this business to be an educator because through that I can make a difference through future generations to become productive citizens,” said Dr. Shepard.

EHSC members voted 3-1 to accept the report.

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