Undergraduate Research: A Culture for Research

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K-State students initiate study of how Taos Pueblo Native Americans are saving an ancient culture

Young Taos Pueblo partygoers cheered as water flowed through an acequia, a 500-year-old irrigation system, to a field planted with heritage seeds.

Among guests at the irrigation party — where people work to clean out the irrigation ditches and enjoy food, music and companionship — were two Kansas State University anthropology students, Jordan Thomas and Kenzie Wade. The students, both minors and involved in undergraduate research at Kansas State University, are interested in how the Taos Pueblo Native Americans in New Mexico are able to attract youth to traditional agriculture and save an ancient culture.

"This is the perfect place to do fieldwork on the sustainability and importance of native preservation," Wade said, "because this group is taking charge of its sovereignty and growing something amazing with the youth."

The majority of the partygoers in their early 20s already own farmland — a vast difference from the lifestyle Thomas and Wade have experienced. The fields were planted with Taos heritage seeds: varieties of corn, beans or squash not found anywhere else and passed down for generations. The fields were planted with Taos heritage seeds: varieties of corn, beans or squash not found anywhere else and passed down for generations.

For more than 1,000 years, the Taos people have inhabited the Pueblo, a multilevel adobe structure and a cultural site on UNESCO’s World Heritage list. Many of their deeply rooted cultural practices involve traditional agriculture and save an ancient culture.

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Opposition and cultural abandonment drove younger generations away, according to Wade. Without the next generation, some feared the ancient culture, which had survived colonization, oppression and introduction of disease, might be lost.

"Multiple organizations tried to help the community get on its feet and be sustainable, but it wasn’t working," Wade said. "The organizations would low interest or the funding would run dry because they didn’t take into account what people wanted."

Today’s Taos Pueblo youth understand the community’s heritage. They started the Taos Pueblo Young Growers to engage the next generation in ancient agriculture practices and reconnect them to their ancestors.

"In Taos, there’s a resurgence of pride for growing with the more traditional methods," Thomas said. "We saw kids out there working with their grandmothers, grazing corn and rolling tamales. The youth were attending the traditional ceremonies, speaking the language and taking pride in it."

With assistance from the Taos County Economic Development Corporation and Red Willow Cooperative, the youth are learning to preserve and strengthen the culture while making their traditions cost-effective.

"Food systems can improve health, heritage and community cohesion but for those to happen, it has to be relevant to indigenous language and culture maintenance," Thomas said. "In Taos, there’s a resurgence of pride for growing with the more traditional methods." Thomas said. "We saw kids out there working with their grandmothers, grazing corn and rolling tamales. The youth were attending the traditional ceremonies, speaking the language and taking pride in it."

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Thomas and Wade will use their work in Taos as a starting point for further investigation of the benefits of food systems and are writing a research article to the documentary as a more in-depth account of Taos Pueblo community.

The community has solar-heated greenhouses; an FDA-approved kitchen so growers can turn their produce into value-added products, such as salsa or jam; and a farmer’s market.

"Some people have taken their products to the regional scale," Thomas said. "They can keep the same agricultural traditions while still having the channel to the economics."

Thomas and Wade are working on a short documentary, “Cultivating Culture,” that tells a cautionary tale of the opposition, traditions and culture of the Taos Pueblo people and how the community has been able to sustain itself in recent years.

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