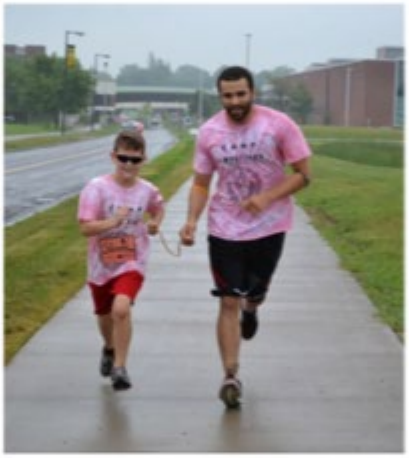
Camp Abilities Four Corners is honored to have been featured in the Journal *Visual Impairment and Deafblind Education Quarterly's* Winter 2025 Special Issue, with an invited article written by Kathryn Hammond, Board Member, and Vicki Numkena, Board President, and supported by Advisory Board members Garrison Tsinajinie and Duree Lomadafkie. Thanks to them all for their hard work in this article about cultural considerations at our Camp.

Because this publication is over 200 pages, we have selected just this article, Pages 71-87. Please find entire publication at this link: http://dvi.uberflip.com/i/1541912-vidbeq-70-4-fall-2025/0?

Winter 2025 Special Issue: Physical Activity for Individuals with Visual Impairment or Deafblindness



Visual Impairment and Deafblind Education Quarterly

Volume 70, Issue 4

The Voice and Vision of Special Education

Council for Exceptional Children
The voice and vision of special education

Cover photo description: The cover photo shows a coach running with an athlete with a tether on a wet sidewalk.

Photo submitted by Lauren J. Lieberman

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Camp Abilities Four Corners: Cultural Respect in Action

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Camp Abilities Four Corners

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Abstract

Camp Abilities Four Corners is dedicated to providing culturally sustaining activities, staff and surroundings for their annual Camp, which is held on the Navajo Indian Reservation in northern Arizona. Navajo student athletes make up about 66% of participants, and 19% of the staff. This article outlines components which are embraced to highlight cultural considerations and provides suggestions for other camps who wish to include Native American beliefs and customs of their student athletes.

The Dream Behind Camp Abilities Four Corners

Figure 1

Camp Abilities Four Corners Logo

Yá'át'ééh *(Navajo greeting)*

Visualize the mile-deep gorge that is one of the seven wonders of the world, the Grand Canyon. Now picture the multi-layered and colored sandstone mesas and bluffs of the high desert, juxtaposed against the bright azure wide open skies, with a few white fluffy clouds drifting along, and scenic vistas stretching out for miles. Imagine the sparkling blue waters of the Colorado River and Lake Powell. The towering San Francisco Peaks, sacred mountain of the Navajo, watch over it all. The beauty and remoteness of this land triggered the dream of Camp Abilities Four Corners (CAFC), who would like to share with readers of this journal how we embed concepts and activities which are culturally sustaining into the week of

activities, for the benefit of other camps wishing to include more Native student athletes in their programs.

As a teacher of students with visual impairment (TSVI), Vicki Numkena, who lived and worked on the Navajo Reservation for many years, became concerned with how often her students with blindness or visual impairments were left out of sports and recreational activities at their schools, due to their impairment. Numkena started planning a new Camp Abilities, so that athletes in the Four Corners area (Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah), could have a camp "in their backyard," while taking advantage of the outstanding recreational opportunities afforded in the region.

Navajo Board and Advisory Board members, as well as Navajos in other staff positions at Camp, have been vital to the success of CAFC. These Navajo leaders assure respectful and appropriate activities and behavior and provide role models for the Navajo student athletes. Please refer to Table 1 for ideas on ways to include Native Americans, of any tribe, in your Camp.

Camp is immersed in Native culture, as lodgings and meals are provided at the iconic Cameron Trading Post, located on the Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona. During meals, diners are surrounded by expertly woven beautiful Navajo rugs, some very large, hung on the walls. Walking through the gift shop to reach the restaurant, Native crafts, jewelry, and more are on display. Cultural

components are embedded in CAFC because of its location, and because of the student athletes and staff who are Navajo. Camp has benefitted from an average of 19% Navajo staff members, and 66% Navajo student athletes, over the past four years.

Another culturally sustaining practice is that all staff meetings, end-of-day get-togethers, and the closing ceremony, are held in the Cameron Trading Post's beautiful Rock Garden, and not in an enclosed meeting room. The Garden is set in the heart of the Trading Post, with flagstone steps leading down to a circular courtyard which includes a fireplace and picnic table. Well-cared for, manicured plants and trees surround the courtyard and provide welcome shade. This natural beauty and calmness set the tone for Camp meetings.

Figure 2

Rock Garden

Table 1

Recommendations for creating a culturally sustaining environment at your Camp

Board Members	Include Native members on your board
Staff Members	Recruit local Natives for staff members
Staff training	Include presentation on cultural considerations, Created and presented by a Native Board Member
Guidelines	Identify and reiterate culturally sustaining guidelines frequently
Native beliefs/land	Teach respect for Native beliefs and their land
Family	Include family members in your welcome and your closing ceremony
Activities	Choose activities which Native student athletes can readily access nearby, and are popular with the young people

Cultural Considerations Training

An early lesson was learned that first year by Numkena and the Board regarding culturally sustaining behavior by Camp staff. Some of the coaches and instructors had flown in from out of the area. During van rides, when campers, coaches and instructors are transported from Cameron to the activity sites for the day, several of the out-of-area staff made comments which showed they did not appreciate the beauty and majesty of the compelling landscape we were living in and travelling through. These derogatory comments were disrespectful of the Navajo student athletes and staff who were present, as this land is their home.

After this experience, Numkena asked Jamie Strong, one of the Navajo Advisory Board members, to create a presentation on Navajo culture for all staff prior to every camp. The Board also implemented a more culturally sustaining screening process for staff. Their goal is that Camp should be filled with staff who are appreciative not only of the natural beauty and sacred nature of the area of Four Corners, but who are also respectful of the generosity of the people who donated lodging and food.

The Cultural Considerations Training presentation was put together by Strong, a Navajo TSVI who also has attended Camp as a staff member. Her presentation includes Navajo history, their language, food, water, land, and family considerations. Staff members learn when athletes arrive at Camp they may be accompanied by an auntie or grandparent rather than their parents, due to the

extended family concept. The adult members of the family may speak Navajo to the student athlete. Many families on the reservation do not take vacations or have money to visit nearby local attractions. Camp is a great opportunity for student athletes to have new experiences relatively close to their own home.

Historically, the Navajo were hunters and gatherers but after placement on the reservation their diet became high in fat, sugar and salt due to the inaccessibility of traditional foods. Adoption of foods from mainstream America, including fast food and ready-made foods, has led to adverse health effects (Diné Policy Institute, 2014). Consequently, Navajo people have struggled with diabetes and obesity (Thompson et al, 2001). Currently, there are multiple programs teaching the community how to garden (Ornelas, 2017), strengthen regional food systems and reduce diet-related health disparities in the Navajo Nation (USDA, 2019). To help combat obesity and diabetes, the Navajo Nation has a tax on "junk foods" (Preventing Chronic Disease, 2020). This information is important for staff to be understanding and accepting, as some student athletes may be overweight. CAFC also makes every effort to include healthy food during Camp. The Cameron Trading Post provides all meals, with staff and athletes choosing from their varied menu, and sack lunches are also provided for everyone. During lunchtime, veggie and fruit trays are also provided and healthy snacks are available throughout the day. Each student athlete receives an Osprey hydration backpack for their use

during Camp and to take home, to assure adequate water intake is easily accomplished.

Water is life on the Navajo reservation. It is sacred and demands respect. Families are careful with every drop as many must haul water to their homes. Navajo staff and student athletes may be seen saying a prayer when crossing over water. Others will ask for protection when recreating in water. Staff are encouraged to be respectful of water and not to waste it by throwing it on pavement or dirt, but rather to walk over to a tree or bush and deposit the water there.

Finally, at the end of the cultural presentation, staff are urged to be respectful of the land and the people they meet. They are reminded they are guests of the Navajo Nation. Many of the sites we visit are sacred, and some areas of the reservation are off limits to non-natives.

Activities Selected to Reflect the Needs and Interests of the Navajo Student Athletes

The scarcity of public pools and formal swimming lessons on the reservation means many children do not learn how to swim, resulting in disproportionately high drowning rates. Up to age thirty, drowning death rates for Native populations are twice as high as for non-Natives (Clemens, 2021). Increased access to basic swimming and water safety skills training can save lives. The Center for Disease

Control (Clemens et al, 2024) recommends hiring diverse aquatic staff who look like the communities they serve, and adapting aquatic programs to meet specific community needs to decrease barriers to learning to swim. Swimming classes are included every year at Camp so student athletes can learn this important and potentially life-saving skill, assisted by Navajo coaches. Swimming lessons take place in both swimming pools and natural lakes.

Figure 3

Campers Swimming in Lake Powell

When at Lake Powell, water sports are included, such as kayaking and stand-up paddle boarding. These are sports young people can engage in with their families "out

their back door." Honoring the traditional Navajo custom of modesty, female athletes are always allowed to wear t-shirts over their swimsuits if they choose to do so.

For the Camp schedule, sports that are most popular with Navajo students are included. When sports are brought up on the reservation, basketball is the first sport mentioned, including children with visual impairment/blindness. Basketball is hugely popular, local high school players become heroes, and families drive hours to attend the games where there is never an empty seat. In Michael Powell's "Canyon Dreams" (2019), the author "shows how important sports can be to youths in struggling communities and illuminates the transcendent magic and painful realities that confront Native Americans coming of age there." He notes the town of Chinle, Arizona, on the reservation, has 4,500 residents, but its high school gym seats 7,000! The public basketball courts in Page, Arizona, are right next to the park with picnic tables for lunch, where student athletes get a chance to learn and practice their ball handling skills. A beeper is placed on a hula hoop, which is then placed over the basket, to serve as an auditory cue for the athletes.

Wrestling, another popular sport on the reservation, was added to the schedule the year after athletes expressed their interest in the wrestling/boxing equipment at the climbing gym. The Navajo proprietor agreed to provide teaching for these two sports as well.

Figure 4

Two Girls Wrestling

Golf is another up and coming sport on the reservation, thanks in part to two PGA golfers, Ricky Fowler and Notah Begay. These Navajo pros have inspired students on the reservation to embrace golf, with at least one unique Navajo golf course located in Steamboat, Arizona, embracing "rez golf." Despite not having a golf course nearby, some high schools on the reservation still have golf teams. Lake Powell National Golf Course in Page provides the CAFC athletes and their coaches the opportunity to practice on the range and putting green, and also to get out on the course and play one hole of best ball on a par three hole. A summer storm rolled in one year, and the athletes delighted in the rain and wind as they rode in the golf carts back to the clubhouse.

CAFC hopes to sustain Navajo culture by affording children with visual

impairments/blindness to be able to explore their environment, which is closely tied to their origin stories, ceremonies and beliefs. Outings include hikes at the Grand Canyon, tours of Antelope Canyon led by Navajos, hiking and an educational presentation at Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument, and a river trip on the Colorado River, which shapes the environment of the Navajo Nation.

At the County Fairgrounds in Tuba City, two Navajo gentlemen, including one whose granddaughter is a student athlete at Camp, brought in horses from small nearby communities. Everyone at Camp had a lesson in horsemanship, as he highlighted Navajo beliefs about the spiritual nature of the horse and the relationship between horses and people. Athletes experienced an easy ride with coaches and horse handlers.

Figure 5

Athlete on a Horse

Inclusion Represents Cultural Respect

Each morning, athletes gather for a walk to the beautiful dining room for breakfast, then everyone loads into one of the 12-passenger vans for the drive to the activity site for the day. Each year, activities are planned in and around Flagstaff, Page, Tuba City, the Grand Canyon, Sunset Crater, and on Lake Powell and the Colorado River. This means everyone is in the vans for 2-3 hours daily. Again, this reflects typical life on the reservation, as most Navajo are accustomed to traveling long distances to their various destinations, be it school, work, or visiting relatives. At Camp, time spent on van rides is used to play games, interact socially, or even sleep, after a long day full of activities. Most spend van time visiting, while travelling through red-tinged mesas and the long vistas of the high desert, through the shadows of the three San Francisco Peaks, and the cool pines around Flagstaff. The Navajo staff who are van drivers always know the alternative routes to our destination, in case of closures or other problems on the road.

Navajo culture is always included, honored and respected. At Camp 2022 and 2023, the art & craft of drumming, making a drum, and decorating individual flutes, were part of our program, supported by grants from the Arizona Commission for the Arts. The student athletes received instruction in Native American-style flute playing. They often played their flutes while riding in the van or in their rooms.

Recognizing the importance of family tradition and relationships is another feature of Camp which aligns with Navajo culture and practice. When families bring their student athlete to Cameron, they become acquainted with the Camp nurse, Director, and their child's one-on-one coach, as well as get a chance to see the room in which their child will be staying. Family presence is also a highlight of the closing ceremony, where each coach presents an award to their student athlete to identify the athlete's individual achievements during Camp. At that ceremony, all staff make efforts to speak personally with families, recounting the unique successes, accomplishments, and personality of each child. Parents and families get an opportunity also to meet their child's new friends, as friendships are made and maintained long after Camp is over.

CAFC had planned a one-day golf clinic in Kirtland, New Mexico, on October 11, 2025, to include family members. This would have given student athletes the chance to spend time with their parents and siblings while enjoying the game of golf, and families the opportunity to see in person how coaches and instructors work with their child with visual impairment. Teen-age and adult non-golfers would have had the chance to learn a new skill. This first-ever clinic was created to honor a generous grant received last year from the Wadsworth Golf Charities Foundation. Mother Nature, in the form of Hurricane Priscilla, had other plans, and the clinic had to be cancelled due to heavy and prolonged rains and

winds, making some roads, both dirt and paved, impassable and dangerous. CAFC Board members used this time to visit the golf courses and meet the PGA professionals, and plans are in motion for the clinic to be held next year.

Conclusion

Camp Abilities Four Corners is embedded in the Navajo culture, largely due to their presence on the reservation for lodging, meetings and activities, as well as for maintaining a focus on providing culturally sustaining concepts and activities for student athletes. Every effort is made to include Navajo community members on the Board and staff, as well as to provide sports and recreational activities which are popular on the reservation and reflect the nature of the surrounding geographical region. For staff members unfamiliar with Navajo culture, a cultural considerations presentation is included during staff trainings. Everyone at Camp is reminded daily of the generosity of their hosts. Respect for the land is reflected in "treading lightly," cleaning up after outings, and being appreciative of the trees, rocks, plants and land formations surrounding athletes and staff daily.

Please visit the website at www.campabilitiesfourcorners.org for more photos, and to see how you can get involved and support CAFC, who say **Ahéheé** (Navajo thank you).

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