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Potawatomi Leadership Program Citizen Potawatomi Nation

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Proud of the increasing number of citizens pursuing college degrees, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation (CPN) leaders became concerned that their talented students were not getting enough education in what it means to be Citizen Potawatomi. To nurture the nations' future political leadership, the tribe launched the Potawatomi Leadership Program, which gives students an unforgettable "crash course" in CPN government, economy, and culture. In doing so, program graduates are armed with the cultural and political knowledge they need to become the leaders they were born to be.

Opportunities far from Home

In the early 1800s, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation was forcibly removed from its traditional homelands in the Great Lakes region. Today, the nation is based in Shawnee, Oklahoma and approximately two-thirds of its 30,000 citizens live outside of Oklahoma. As recently as the early 1970s, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation government was housed in a Bureau of Indian Affairs trailer with only a few hundred dollars in the tribal bank account. Beginning in 1975, CPN began to take over the management of its own affairs and has since grown to become a major economic force in the region.

With this success, CPN began to give hundreds of college scholarships to promising students every year. However, many of the recipients did not have a connection to the nation or a way to learn about tribal affairs. While CPN's current leadership had spearheaded major changes in governance and overseen hard-won expansions of sovereignty, many younger citizens were unaware of this history and even of the functions and operations of tribal government.

Youth born and brought up far from Oklahoma often faced the additional challenge of having fewer ties to CPN. Because of their physical distance from tribal lands, many felt disconnected.

In the words of one Citizen Potawatomi scholarship recipient, “I feared if someone asked me about my tribe I wouldn’t know what to say.” Even students who grew up in Oklahoma felt alienated from home when they moved away to pursue their studies. Like many tribes across the country, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation faced an important question: When your citizens live far away, how do you make sure they still belong and have the wherewithal to participate in their government?

An Internship with a Difference

The Citizen Potawatomi leadership recognized that the best way to educate tribal youth about the nation’s governing system, laws, policies, and programs was from within the heart of the tribal government. The Potawatomi Leadership Program provides an opportunity for promising students to supplement their college education with a greater understanding of the Citizen Potawatomi nation’s governance and operations. Since 2003, the program has selected up to ten Citizen Potawatomi youth annually to participate in an intense six-week leadership experience in Shawnee, Oklahoma. All Citizen Potawatomi youth between the ages of 18 and 20 are informed of the program, but to be eligible, students must be entering their first or second year of college. The Vice-Chair of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation selects participants based on their grades, motivation, accomplishments, and geographic distribution (the program seeks participants from both within and beyond the tribal territory). During the program, participants live together in a house with a “den mother” and a counselor.

Unlike internship programs that focus on job training, the Potawatomi Leadership Program develops leadership skills by fully immersing participants in all aspects of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. They become acquainted with the work of each tribal department and tour the nation’s businesses. They attend legislative sessions and board meetings. Talking circles held throughout the program give students the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and discuss challenging issues such as identity and personal development. They also are encouraged to envision how they can make meaningful contributions to the nation. Each student prepares a final presentation and a capstone project in their area of interest. Some of the students’ ideas are already being implemented, such as a smart phone application for the Family Reunion, a visitor brochure for the Eagle Aviary, and a Potawatomi coloring book for the language program.

Potawatomi culture is carefully integrated into all aspects of the leadership program. During their six weeks, the students take language classes and visit with elders, who in turn share stories and teach traditional crafts. They build a sweat lodge under the tutelage of an elder and are introduced to cleansing rituals. They learn dances and hand games in preparation for the Family Reunion Festival, the Citizen Potawatomi nation’s largest and most important annual cultural event. At the festival, the students are announced to the crowd, and they participate in the Grand Entry wearing regalia. Fittingly, in the last week of the program, participants

without a Potawatomi name are invited to participate in a naming ceremony with the Chairman of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

Although the Potawatomi Leadership Program only lasts a few weeks, its impact on participants is lasting. The youth make new connections and refine their leadership skills. Most importantly, they gain a broader understanding of their tribal roots, experience how the nation is evolving, and identify ways they can contribute to the government. The program also has a ripple effect: once the students go home, they tell family members what they have learned and encourage them to become active as well. In the words of one participant, “My father would enjoy being more involved, but he doesn’t know much about the tribe at all. I can change that now.”

Valuing Future Leaders

With its focus on developing leadership skills within a cultural context, the Potawatomi Leadership Program stands out as an effective way to prepare the next generation to take over the task of building the nation. In the words of the Vice-Chair, “It is vitally important to nurture our young people as leaders in order to continue the progress.” Increasing the number of youth who have the skills, cultural knowledge, and in-depth understanding of the operations of the nation is crucial to ensuring that there will be quality leaders for tribal government in the future. The benefits also extend beyond tribal government to all of the aspects of running the nation’s services and enterprises. Sixteen alumni of the program have already chosen to return to Oklahoma to work for the tribe, an amazing turn-around for students who once questioned whether they were “Potawatomi enough.”

Notably, the Potawatomi Leadership Program takes a long-term view of leadership development. The students selected for this program are just beginning their studies and are years away from choosing a career. The Chairman of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation notes that the principle of this program is an investment in “seed corn” to obtain a sustained future harvest. By giving Potawatomi students an overview of all of the nation’s activities and strengthening their cultural understanding, the Leadership Program hopes to inspire them to become more involved later in their lives. There is already evidence that the program has influenced some students’ career choices. In one striking example, a program participant decided to apply for a Cultural Studies in Education Master’s degree in order to pursue the dream of founding a Potawatomi immersion school.

The Potawatomi Leadership Program represents a novel way of dealing with the difficult reality that increasing numbers of tribal citizens are living away from the tribal government service area. Individuals may leave tribal lands to pursue their education or to take advantage of a great job opportunity, or they may be the children of those who left years earlier. Without geographic proximity, youth are removed from the elders who pass along teachings, find it hard to participate in cultural events, and perhaps cannot even imagine ever working for their

tribal government. The Potawatomi Leadership Program sends a strong message that Potawatomi youth are considered valued members of the nation no matter where they live, and it brings them to the nation at a key point in their lives. Whatever these students choose to do next, they have a renewed sense of pride in their Citizen Potawatomi heritage.

Bringing the Lessons Home

The Citizen Potawatomi Nation has found a way to offer its youth an unparalleled opportunity to be educated in what it means to be Potawatomi today. The participants of the Potawatomi Leadership Program learn first-hand about the nation's accomplishments and strengthen their connection to the nation. The students go out into the world with a deeper understanding of their tribal identity and greater confidence. By investing in its promising students, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation is ensuring its long-term ability to govern well and continue to prosper. When the time is right, these young Potawatomi will be ready to step up as the next generation of Citizen Potawatomi Nation leaders.

Lessons:

- Plans for growing the next generation of leadership are paramount for every tribal nation.
- Long-term investments to cultivate leadership are investments in self-governance.
- A nation's own citizens will become its best future leaders, political and otherwise.