Finding a sense of identity
By Carol Berry

DENVER - Navajo perspectives on the past can shape 'a really distinct Navajo sense of identity' for contemporary students, a Dine' educator said June 12.

University of New Mexico assistant professor Jennifer Nez Denetdale is the author of "Reclaiming Dine' History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita." The book, about her great-great-great-grandparents, is "probably the first Navajo history by a Navajo."

She spoke about Dine' history to participants in a weeklong institute that brought Navajo Nation educators and scholars together to explore Dine' and mainstream U.S. traditions of history and government for use by schools in Navajoland and adjoining areas.

The summer institute of the Presidential Academy for American History and Civics is part of the joint Middle Ground Project of the Navajo Education Technology Consortium and the University of Northern Colorado. The five-year federally funded $2 million grant began in 2005.

Professor Michael Welsh, UNC director of the academy, said the program reaches about 2,000 students in 25 school districts of the Navajo Nation and in some border towns in Arizona and New Mexico. Ultimately, 125 teachers will have been given practical, not academic, curriculum assistance, he said.

In a brief interview, Denetdale said she is the first Navajo with a Ph.D. It has been difficult to "return to societies based on traditional principles" - which she termed a key issue - since Navajo histories were written by non-Indians.

Yet creating a Navajo sense of identity is "very important, and it should be part of the purpose of education," she said.

In attempting to achieve the Middle Ground Project - the meeting place of Western and indigenous histories - differing ideas of the "perfect time" enter in, she told institute participants.

Western history has "specific ideas of progress - always looking to the future," she said, while Navajo culture places the "perfect time" in the creation stories in order to "create and recreate our sense of the past for the future."
While Western historians may emphasize names and dates, for example, Navajo oral history has stressed the importance of ancestors' characteristics, she said.

"The purpose of American history is to inculcate our children with American values," she said, and there is a need to create a comparable Navajo national history to incorporate Navajo values.

"I take my history very personally," she said, explaining that while driving from Albuquerque to Denver for the institute, she thought about "the indigenous people who were once owners of this continent" and the "less than 3 percent left of what our ancestors lived on."

"How did this happen? What happened here that we are less than 1 percent of the population today?"

In this and other areas, Denetdale expressed the importance of connection, linking Natives' current status to what happened historically, not with an eye to self-pity but in order to reclaim history and "demand justice for indigenous people."

Citing the invisibility and denial of "the incredible violence used to dispossess us," she said the contemporary normalization of violence and poverty in Native communities could ultimately lead to a recognition of the ways in which "structures of dependency were created."

A "veil of denial" exists because the consequences of conquest were sporadic acts of great violence, but an overall picture is lacking, she said.

Oral tradition and photography can yield a different history than that presented in the master narrative, she said.

Centennial photos from 1968, Navajo fairs, and Navajo newspapers promote a message of "the superiority of Western technological knowledge" in agriculture, child-rearing and other areas, and "all of this was [to say] we were never good enough; we were always found wanting."

Denetdale teaches Native history, Navajo history and courses on Native women.

During the week, 34 teachers participated in primary sources research at the National Archives and Records Administration at the Federal Center near Denver and heard presentations on the U.S. Constitution and history, federal courts, community studies, Dine' government, Dine' science/traditions, and other areas.