

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Years ago, one Tribal Nation, unhappy with the lack of progress its citizens who relied on TANF were making, took over administration of the program from the state. It initiated its own assessment of its newly inherited TANF clients, discovering that a full 40 percent of them had disabilities, and most of those had learning disabilities. The data also confirmed that these disabilities often factored into clients' failure to comply with program requirements, which resulted in fines and, in turn, a spike in dire need applications by those clients. Now, these clients get routed to the Nation's Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation program upon intake for the specialized support they need to prepare for employment.

Meanwhile, an intertribal organization that provides workforce development services to Native people looking to build careers in a specific field conducted the latest in its ongoing series of comprehensive studies evaluating the evolving state of the collective Indian Country workforce in that field. Among the study's key findings: half of the staff among tribal workforces were 50 years of age or older, less than two percent were younger than 30 years of age, those workforces needed a 65 percent increase in staff, and many Tribal Nations offered "uncompetitive" salary and benefit packages.¹ In response to these "staggering workforce statistics," the organization developed a multifaceted strategic plan to work with its member Tribal Nations to recruit, train, and retain field-specific professionals and technicians "to address current and anticipated [workforce] shortfalls."²

These examples illustrate what Tribal Nations have long understood: *assessment* – what is being evaluated, how, how often, by whom, and for what ultimate purpose – matters. The data that results from it can make all the difference between an ill-informed and shortsighted approach to workforce development and a well-informed, strategically driven, and impactful one. A primary reason for the former is that outsiders – primarily the federal and state governments – have long sat in the driver's seat when it comes to generating data about Native people, specifically the progress made by those who access workforce education, training, and related services.

The inherent shortcomings of federal data sources – the U.S. Census, **ACS**, and the various criteria the federal government uses to measure its definition of program "success" – are many and well-documented. For example, they are ill-equipped to gauge the true severity of the challenges facing tribal workforce development, nor do they properly account for those "invisible" tribal citizens who aren't looking for work; what skills and education they may have;

"We now go above and beyond federal requirements to see what we need to be collecting and analyzing to see the change that we know is needed here."

**– ELVA "COOKIE" ALLAN, DIRECTOR,
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and what skills, education, and support they need to reconnect to the job market and secure and sustain employment.⁴ As one workforce development practitioner explains, "Conditions affecting Indian workers in reservation markets can often be very different than those for non-Indians in urban areas, differences which are not recognized in standard labor market research efforts."⁵ Because federal data doesn't accurately capture Indian Country's labor force realities, federal decision-makers struggle to devise effective policies – or properly support Tribal Nations' solutions – to address them. In addition to poor data quality, the federal government has proven wholly incapable of regularly generating real-time data documenting the rapidly evolving Native workforce, a workforce that may look very differently from one Tribal Nation to the next. For example, despite a Congressional requirement to produce the American Indian Population and Labor Force Report every two years, the federal government has failed to produce one for over a decade, in part because it refuses to include data generated by Tribal Nations.⁶

For Tribal Nations and other Native workforce development entities to develop effective local workforce development approaches, they need to drive the data that informs them. Since they know their own communities and conditions best, they are best positioned to collect the data and assess what it means for them. Because it's *their* people and futures at stake, they know the right questions to ask – questions that outsiders wouldn't think to pose – and they also know best how to interpret (and to what ends) the answers the people provide to those questions. Leading in this way also enables them "to incorporate cultural, contextual, and political concerns in program evaluation," and it enhances "self-determination over program activities."⁷

ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ Does our Nation regularly assess the true unemployment rate of tribal citizens in and around our reservation, including those who can work but aren't seeking employment (and why)? What would it take to develop such a mechanism?
- ▶ How do our workforce development and related programs collect, analyze, and share participant data? Are these data streams stored and maintained in a centralized database that provide us a complete picture? If not, what steps do we need to take?
- ▶ How often do we conduct a comprehensive assessment of our programs' effectiveness based on participant outcomes and refine our programs accordingly? Is it frequent enough, and does it capture everything we need?
- ▶ What data partnerships do we need to create/strengthen with other Tribal Nations, TCUs, other academic institutions, our TERO office, tribal/area employers, and others to support our ability to create the longitudinal workforce data picture we need?
- ▶ Considering our Nation's long-range economic and community development priorities, what kinds of jobs will we need 5-10 years from now? How many? How are we preparing our people to fill them?
- ▶ How many Native people is our workforce development approach serving? Is it serving everyone it should? Given our growing population and strategic priorities, how many will it need to serve 5-10 years from now? How will we grow our capacity to keep pace?

INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



Mountain | Plains Regional Native CDFI Coalition

During the COVID-19 pandemic, nine Native CDFIs across North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming formed the Mountain | Plains Regional Native CDFI Coalition to "leverage [their] collective knowledge, skills, assets, and partnerships to build equitable platforms that support thriving Native economies in the region."¹ In 2022, the Coalition secured a landmark U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) investment to implement "a holistic, five-year strategy to reimagine and actualize capital systems that center relationship, reciprocity, and resilience."² Based on their anecdotal experiences, Coalition members had identified "the shared challenge of hiring qualified individuals from our own communities"³ as a major obstacle to achieving this strategy, but to develop targeted solutions to overcome it, they needed a clear, data-informed picture of this complex human capacity challenge.⁴ Using EDA funding, the Coalition commissioned a workforce needs assessment so "innovative solutions to support the Indigenous Finance Industry workforce could be explored."⁵ The assessment revealed: (1) the CDFIs' greatest staff training need areas were business counseling/planning/management, loan underwriting, data management/reporting, and grant writing; (2) area training programs were "generally not CDFI-specific"; (3) workforce wrap-around services like childcare and housing were vital for recruiting quality employees; and (4) to fully service their communities, Coalition members would need to grow their combined workforce by 46 percent.⁶ In response, the Coalition forged a plan "to develop and hire from a regional pool of Native finance professionals"⁷, including creating a Native CDFI-customized curriculum, cultivating partnerships with area TCUs to co-develop a specialized certificate program, and offering existing and prospective employees its own training course.⁸ In just a few years, the Coalition "has made significant strides"⁹ in achieving its long-range strategy, onboarding more than 30 "quality and trained employees"¹⁰ across the nine CDFIs and the new CDFI they jointly created, and expanding its peer-to-peer learning network beyond executive directors to management-level staff, resulting "in leveraged capital that would not have been available individually."¹¹

LEARNING LINK: <https://www.ncai.org/workforcedevtoolkit/cdfi.pdf>

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Osage Nation

Osage has long engaged in strategic planning, but until recently it had "limited information about its citizens, making it difficult to assess" their needs.¹ Committed to using all available tools "to distill the needs of our Osage people and... respond accordingly"², in 2022 the Osage Nation Congress established the Osage Nation Census, to be conducted every five years.³ After consulting more than 50 Osage department directors and all three governmental branches about the data needed to better serve Osage members, Osage's Self-Governance and Strategic Planning Department launched the Census in 2023.⁴ Deployed for two months to Osage members nationwide and around the world through community meetings, an "aggressive social media campaign," and gift card and raffle incentives, the Census generated more than 3,900 responses.⁵ Containing more than 80 questions, the Census included questions critical to understanding the Osage people's workforce development needs, such as educational attainment level, employment status and field, barriers to continuing education, and job training interests.⁶ While Osage leaders entered the process believing Osage members were predominantly "needs-based," results showed more of an "assets-based"⁷ population, with 58 percent of Osages employed full-time, 15 percent owning businesses, nearly half with a bachelor's or advanced degree, and an unemployment rate under seven percent.⁸ Using this comprehensive data, Osage is now working to: (1) efficiently geotarget the delivery of workforce development services to particular locations showing heightened needs, (2) refine the policies and procedures governing those services, (3) channel additional resources into higher education initiatives "to build an independent, competitive workforce," (4) develop financial literacy and other educational resources for local schools to preempt the emergence of "needs-based dynamics," and (5) launch new workforce training initiatives in high-growth fields such as aerospace.⁹ To elevate the impact of its Census data, Osage recently signed an **MOA** with the U.S. Census Bureau, becoming the first Tribal Nation to have its data recognized and accepted by the Bureau, "ensuring Osages are fully represented on a federal level."¹⁰

LEARNING LINK: <https://www.ncai.org/workforcedevtoolkit/osage.pdf>

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POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Evaluate the data your workforce development and related programs collect, about and for whom, and for what reasons. Assess how useful it is for informing your long-range workforce development priorities and creating/redesigning programs to advance them.
- ▶ Assess your workforce development and related programs and the linkages between them using a **SOAR** data analysis: Are they individually and collectively capable of achieving our definition of workforce development "success"?⁷ Do they foster innovation?
- ▶ Dedicate permanent funding for staff, operations, and technology to drive the Nation's data efforts.
- ▶ Build a centralized data system that collates real-time workforce data from across your Tribal Nation and its enterprises to create a comprehensive picture of the Nation's workforce and its most pressing education, training, and related service needs.
- ▶ Institute a regular tribal census (conducted at least every five years) that gauges citizens' current workforce readiness and what education, skills, and experience they need to acquire to contribute to your Nation's building of a prosperous future.
- ▶ Develop a picture of the current and projected tribal/area labor market – and a process for updating it. Engage tribal/area employers to gather data about their long-range labor needs.
- ▶ Partner with area Tribal Nations, TCUs, other academic institutions, and others to help with data design, collection, and analysis.