

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Wrestling with a high dropout rate among its high school students that hampered their ability to enter and thrive in the workforce later in life, one Tribal Nation in the Pacific Northwest decided to make a preemptive move. It created a summer “pre-employment” training program for tribal youth ages 13-15 that promotes the development of personal accountability, work ethic, and “pride in community.”¹ This “hands-on” initiative encourages participants to stay in school by teaching them a “multitude of transferable skills they can apply to later employment” for the Nation or elsewhere.² A growing number are doing so, with many moving on to higher education.³

This Nation is among many who realize that if they are to develop their human capacity to create brighter, self-determined futures, then they need to start young. Taking action, they are developing “first-chance” academic and workforce preparedness programs⁴ that target youth at an early age, providing them chances to: explore different careers (and the hard work required to build them); cultivate their desire, confidence, and ability to pursue them; and deepen their appreciation of their role as tribal citizens. These strategies (internships, fellowships, summer camps, job shadowing, etc.) help to raise Tribal Nations’ expectations of their young people, elevate young people’s expectations of themselves, and support young people as they strive to meet those expectations. They also affirm to young people and other citizens that everyone has valued roles to play in building a brighter future for the Nation, regardless of who they are, how young or old they are, where they are, their current situation, and the specific workforce challenges they face. They just need support to develop their inherent potential to play those roles.

The federal government’s design of workforce development programs for Indian Country has taught us that one-size-fits-all approaches don’t work well for Tribal Nations given their distinct workforce challenges and objectives. Tribal Nations are finding success when they take the reins and develop targeted, customized solutions that address their individual circumstances, places, goals, and communities. These solutions appropriately take many forms and serve many purposes, but NCAI’s research illuminates three trends – solutions that: (1) serve particular groups within the Nation by neutralizing the specific workforce challenges that impact them in certain ways; (2) build particular skills and expertise among the Nation’s citizenry that address its critical needs and advance its long-range priorities; and (3) identify the structural trouble spots that inhibit workforce development/growth and design structural interventions to tackle them. The following is a list of some common types of targeted workforce development solutions that NCAI has observed growing across Indian Country:

“We want to reach and teach young people that are still in grade school, middle school, and high school so by the time they get out of high school they should have an idea, a plan as to what direction they want to go.”

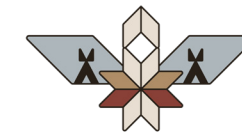
– ALEX YAZZA, JR., FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OWENS VALLEY CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER⁵

- **Single parents:** to help them overcome often significant childcare and financial challenges
- **Justice-involved tribal citizens:** re-entry programs to support their successful reintegration into Native communities
- **Veterans:** to help them adjust to life after the service and train for and build post-service careers
- **Individuals with disabilities:** to navigate their specific obstacles to prepare for and sustain employment
- **Dislocated workers:** to transition them following job losses into new, sustainable careers through training in high-demand fields
- **Emerging leaders:** leadership training to cultivate and prepare the next generation of political, programmatic, and community leaders that teaches about the Tribal Nation’s history, constitution, governance system, and the appropriate roles they must play
- **Mid-career professionals:** who need specialized professional development to advance further in their careers and ascend to leadership roles in their fields
- **Field-specific education and training:** to build the skills of tribal citizens in the specific fields their Nations have deemed vital to managing and protecting their lands and resources, revitalizing their cultures, strengthening their governance systems, developing their communities, and growing their economies
- **Research capacity development:** training Native people to serve as researchers to help Tribal Nations generate, analyze, and use the data they need
- **Citizen entrepreneurs:** to grow the private sector economies of Tribal Nations through Native-owned small business development, which creates jobs and keeps dollars circulating within Native communities

ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ What steps are we taking to (1) assess the particular workforce challenges facing specific segments of our tribal citizenry and (2) design customized solutions to address them? Are there specific groups we are missing?
- ▶ What existing funding sources could we draw from to support these new solutions? If we don’t have the funding in hand, what new funding sources should we pursue to support them?
- ▶ What specific skills and experience does our Nation need most now and in the future based on our community and economic development priorities? Based on the regional labor market forecast? Are/how are we cultivating those skills and experience among our people to prepare them to thrive in careers in those priority fields?
- ▶ What are we doing to cultivate tribal citizens to become employers as well as employees (by becoming owners and operators of small businesses? What steps can we take to build a system of support that can prepare them to successfully play that role?
- ▶ How is our Nation partnering with local college(s), Native CDFIs, and other partners to develop specialized curricula geared towards our priority fields or particular community groups and their learning challenges? How can we grow these partnerships?
- ▶ Are there cost-effective workforce development solutions our Nation could create by partnering with other Tribal Nations?

INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



MIGIZI

Based in Minneapolis-St. Paul, MIGIZI was established in 1977 to counteract “misrepresentations and inaccuracies about Native people in the media.”¹ In the five decades since, it has evolved into a multifaceted “hub for youth empowerment”², providing “a strong circle of support” that helps Native youth graduate high school, pursue post-secondary education, and forge their career paths.³ MIGIZI’s Cultural Leadership Academic Wellbeing program for middle and high school students provides in- and after-school supports including tutoring, homework help, cultural immersion activities, and college tours.⁴ Meanwhile, its two career pathway programs offer Native students targeted, culturally responsive career exploration and job training in two high-demand fields: media and green energy.⁵ MIGIZI’s First Person Productions internship “empowers young people to be the next generation of Native storytellers” by learning new and innovative media practices⁶, while its Green Tech Institute internship equips youth “with tools and knowledge to work within the fast-growing green energy and construction sector.”⁷ Interns are paid \$13.75 an hour, and MIGIZI will soon launch an initiative connecting their internship grads with paid internships with partnering local employers.⁸ The annual number of MIGIZI interns has quadrupled over the past several years, due in large part to the organization’s cultivation of a diversified funding base featuring philanthropic and individual donors, contract revenue from area school districts, investment earnings, and State of Minnesota grant dollars.⁹ MIGIZI’s philanthropic partners include Best Buy, which helped finance the Teen Tech Center, an interactive space where youth ages 13-18 engage in hands-on learning in robotics, coding, 3D modeling/printing, and film and music production, to name a few.¹⁰ In 2024, to support its growing internship programs, MIGIZI created four Youth Lead Assistant positions, which are filled by MIGIZI alumni attending college who work 20 hours per week facilitating career pathway activities and serving as peer leaders.¹¹ The largest summer employer of Native youth in the Twin Cities, MIGIZI boasts an exceptional 85 percent high school graduation rate by its participants.¹²

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

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Muscogee Nation (MCN)

Concerned the State of Oklahoma wasn’t doing enough to prepare its people who were leaving prison for life outside of it, MCN established its Reintegration Program (RIP) in 2004. Committed to protecting the public by “re-invest[ing] positive citizens back into our communities”¹, RIP provides its clients an array of restorative support services rooted in Muscogee culture.² These include pre-release needs assessments, GED acquisition, life skills and vocational training programs, resumé preparation, college tuition assistance, behavioral/mental health supports, legal services, work clothing and tools, financial assistance for housing and groceries, and job placement services – whatever each client needs to avoid reoffending, get a job, and build a career.³ RIP clients must work or be actively pursuing employment; when not working, they must “pay it forward” by volunteering to perform community services, from mowing tribal elders’ lawns to picking up roadside trash.⁴ In 2021, RIP launched its Fiber Optic Technician (FOT) program, which teaches 15-participant cohorts trade-critical skills in the high-growth field.⁵ After eight weeks, trainees complete four-week paid internships before seeking employment. FOT boasts a 100 percent job placement rate for its graduates, who can make upwards of \$100,000 a year working for RIP’s network of employers.⁶ Trainees who need housing reside and train at RIP’s campus, which features a 36-bed transitional living facility for eligible RIP clients, “state-of-the-art educational and vocational training” classrooms, and RIP’s administrative headquarters.⁷ RIP also recently opened a call center on site to employ RIP clients while they reside there. By eliminating all of the barriers – such as a lack of transportation – standing in the way of participants’ success, RIP makes its exceedingly difficult for them to fail, which explains the 6.9 percent recidivism rate among RIP clients (dramatically lower than Oklahoma’s 15.6 percent rate).⁸ Following the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* Supreme Court decision, RIP expanded its services to support justice-involved MCN members during their sentencing processes, which has enabled many to avoid prison by completing RIP-customized diversionary plans.⁹

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

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POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Assess how severely specific workforce development challenges (see “Challenges” worksheet exercise on the bottom of page 5) are impacting certain groups in your Nation and design/refine your programs to comprehensively combat them.
- ▶ Use your Nation’s long-term priorities and tribal/regional economic growth forecasts as primary decision-making criteria to target your workforce development investments in specific ways (e.g., by supporting tribal citizens to obtain bachelor’s and master’s degrees in business administration and then hiring them within your tribal economic development corporations and enterprises).⁶
- ▶ Develop stand-alone initiatives that provide your youth with academic and workforce preparedness training and opportunities for career exploration before they reach high school. If necessary, develop partnerships to defray the cost of doing so.
- ▶ Create a specialized program to engage unemployed, working-age tribal citizens who are not actively looking for work to: (1) identify the challenges inhibiting their employment, and (2) help them overcome those challenges so they can secure area jobs.
- ▶ Develop targeted, family-strengthening workforce development approaches that address obstacles faced by program participants’ family members (e.g., a disabled elder requiring in-home care) to give participants the best chance of career success.
- ▶ Develop a coalition partnership (with TCUs, CDFIs, etc.) to cultivate aspiring citizen-entrepreneurs to become business owners.