

## FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

A few years ago, the leaders and education directors of several Tribal Nations met with board members of the public K-12 school district that was educating most of their Nations' youth. Among the Nations' pressing concerns was the fact the school system – despite serving so many Native students – employed few Native teachers. So did the school system have a plan to recruit more Native teachers? “No,” was the answer. But then the question was posed to the Tribal Nations present: “What are you doing to encourage and prepare your own people for careers in education?” They responded, “*We don’t have a plan either.*” This conversation made the tribal representatives realize their Nations’ workforce development activities weren’t intentionally advancing what they had identified as a strategic priority – and the need to connect the two. The Tribal Nations and school district have since instituted a plan to jointly train and recruit local Native teachers in partnership with area college teacher preparation programs.

Across Indian Country, the success of nation-rebuilding efforts hinges on such strategic vision, or as some scholars have called it, “strategic orientation.”<sup>1</sup> In the realm of workforce development, vision is forged when the Native community in question has a clear, widely understood sense of the future it seeks to create for itself – Native people teaching their own, for instance – and makes decisions about how to build its human capacity based on the long-term priorities the community considers vital to creating that future.

For example, one Tribal Nation has structured its workforce development activities to advance its overarching goal of molding tribal citizens capable of contributing to the nation throughout their lives, from “cradle through career” and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Another prioritizes on-reservation citizens in its higher education scholarship funding to support its strategic commitment to reversing **brain drain**, ensuring it has the local human capacity it needs to accomplish its long-term nation-rebuilding goals. Another has forged a 10-year strategic plan that positions workforce/entrepreneurship development as one of the plan’s three primary pillars and the vehicle for advancing the other two pillars: tribal governance and economic development.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, an inter-tribal non-profit organization explicitly gears all of its youth-based workforce development programming to cultivate not only “a sustainable tribal workforce of respected Native American scientists and technicians that serves the tribes’ salmon management programs,” but also nationally renowned Native faculty “in areas of science and technology to support fisheries and coastal-margin ecosystem management” for generations to come.<sup>4</sup>

As a Tribal Nation charts its strategic vision for a prosperous future based on its own, culturally rooted definition of prosperity, it must place workforce development at the functional core of how it will go

**“A strong Tribal economy is grounded in a healthy workforce that is well educated, entrepreneurial in spirit, and diverse. Investment in people and their economic well-being is the most important element of economic resiliency and sovereign governance.”**

– NEZ PERCE TRIBE, COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (2022-2027)<sup>5</sup>

about making that vision a reality. Conversely, as the Tribal Nation crafts its overarching workforce development approach and the specific activities that comprise it, the Nation must do so with that greater, *national* purpose in mind. As a former TCU president once explained, “Sometimes tribal government, as it creates a plan, does not make a correlation between that plan and the capabilities, needs, and competencies of the local tribal population. If we don’t put those two together, then the best laid of plans...are not going to work.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Tribal Nations and the other Native-led entities must always be answering in practice the question, “How are we cultivating and leveraging the inherent potential of our Native people to forge the brighter future we seek for ourselves?” This is a multi-generational proposition requiring a multi-generational approach. It demands Tribal Nations and other Native entities:

- marry long-range workforce development strategies to their long-range community and economic development priorities so they build the right human capacity to achieve those priorities;
- focus on preparing people to *build careers* and not just *get jobs*, which will enhance upward mobility, individual and familial self-sufficiency, and community prosperity over time;
- diversify the careers they train people for beyond public sector careers that don’t create jobs to private sector careers (e.g., working in tribal enterprises or as business owners) that do;
- thoughtfully define the *reach* of their workforce development approaches, namely whether/how they will serve tribal citizens living outside of tribal lands and to what ends; and
- ensure their long-term priorities drive funding for their workforce development efforts and not the other way around.

## ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ Does our Nation have a vision and plan for what it wants its future to look like 25 years now? How about 50-100 years from now? If so, how is it preparing its people to help it reach that destination?
- ▶ Looking ahead one generation, what should our local Native workforce look like? What should it be capable of doing, and how should it be strengthening the community?
- ▶ What is the multigenerational mission of our workforce development approach? Does it explicitly speak to and advance in targeted ways the long-range communal goals of our community? If not, how can we refine our mission to do so?
- ▶ Do we have a comprehensive, long-term workforce development plan? If not, why not? What would it take to develop and implement one, and for tribal leaders, workforce development practitioners, and citizens to truly own, support, and drive it?
- ▶ Does our workforce development approach prioritize the development of Native people’s skills, experience, employability, and career advancement in specific fields that our community has deemed most important? If not, how can we change that?
- ▶ As a tribal leader/workforce development practitioner, are the decisions I make and the work I do each day building the Nation’s human capacity to further its long-range priorities?

## INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



### Change Labs

A Native-led non-profit serving the Navajo and Hopi communities, Change Labs was created in 2019 to grow a vital yet often overlooked component of a thriving Native workforce: entrepreneurs. Its mission is to help entrepreneurs overcome the systemic barriers they face to “build thriving ventures that strengthen our communities and our economic sovereignty.”<sup>1</sup> At the outset, it developed a comprehensive “Theory of Change” to foster small businesses on tribal lands by cultivating what nourishes them: (1) social capital (access to peers, mentors, and business coaches/support organizations), (2) human capital (entrepreneurs’ education, experience, and knowledge), (3) financial and physical capital (tangible assets like loans and equipment that entrepreneurs need to operate their businesses), and (4) social/economic agency (the traits an entrepreneur needs to act on their skills and assets and “successfully navigate business activities”).<sup>2</sup> Implementing its Theory of Change, Change Labs set six long-term goals, including becoming a community-recognized hub for starting businesses, creating a staff team with deep knowledge about the issues facing local entrepreneurs, and educating elected tribal and community leaders about the policy solutions needed to address those issues.<sup>3</sup> To achieve them, Change Labs established its Business Incubator and Kinship Lending programs, which trains entrepreneurs, provides them low-interest loans for business start-ups, and connects them to other resources.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing small business success depends on the commercial environment, it also conducted a study of the constraints of “Doing Business on the Navajo Nation,” finding it is 2-3 times more expensive and takes seven times longer to start a business on tribal lands than in nearby border towns (data it using to advance tribal policy change).<sup>5</sup> Growing its ability to build “an entrepreneurship ecosystem from the ground up”<sup>6</sup>, Change Labs opened its first physical “E-ship Hub” for entrepreneurs in 2023, with a second slated for 2025.<sup>7</sup> Fostering 76 small business start-ups to date, it recently partnered with the Navajo Nation to deploy \$13.3 million in SSBCI-based loans, and plans to expand its lending to add a “second-stage” loan program to foster business growth.<sup>8</sup>

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

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### Pascua Yaqui Tribe (PYT)

Confronting an unemployment rate five times higher than the State of Arizona’s rate, tribal jobs heavily concentrated in tribal government and its two casinos, and a tribally-owned construction company with more work than it had qualified workers, PYT took action.<sup>1</sup> Enacting its operational mission to “envision, invest, and employ”<sup>2</sup>, the Tribe’s Pascua Yaqui Development Corporation (PYDC) merged funding from the U.S. Economic Development Administration and several other federal sources to establish and outfit its state-of-the-art Career Pivot Centers.<sup>3</sup> The Centers are designed to serve as a “Field of Dreams”<sup>4</sup> for construction training where previously “nobody local was offering it.”<sup>5</sup> Currently featuring four pieces of heavy equipment and eventually training simulators found nowhere else in the rapidly growing Tucson area, the Centers provide industry certificate trainings in heavy equipment operation and construction, and will soon add property management certification, property and cyber security, facilities maintenance, and real estate certification (PYT and PYDC also plan to add a solar tech training program at the Centers in the future to prepare PYT members for careers in that high-demand field).<sup>6</sup> PYT members who complete Center trainings are then channeled into jobs with the Tribe’s construction company, its Housing and Facilities Management departments, and PYDC’s partner employers, where they earn annual salaries more than twice the median household income on the PYT reservation.<sup>7</sup> PYDC also rents out the Centers to other training providers to use their skid steer, backhoe, loader, forklift, excavator, and other equipment at affordable rates, reinvesting the income these rentals generate back into the Centers’ training programs.<sup>8</sup> PYDC has also partnered with Central Arizona College and the nearby Tohono O’odham Nation’s college to have them provide college credit to the Centers’ heavy equipment operation trainees, making them more marketable and capable of career advancement over the long run.<sup>9</sup> Recognizing “there will always be a demand for these workers”<sup>10</sup>, PYDC is positioning the Centers as a “hub for construction in Tucson” that will “help our community for seven generations.”<sup>11</sup>

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

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## POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Treat workforce development as a *multi-generational* effort: Don’t focus only on Native people who need jobs and income now – ensure your approach consciously works to foster the prosperous community you seek to create over the long run.
- ▶ Establish and connect your workforce development activities to advance/achieve specific priorities contained in you Nation’s long-range community and economic development plan. If you don’t have such a plan in place, make sure workforce development – and your specific role – becomes a primary consideration in its formation.
- ▶ Define the breadth of your workforce development approach to advance that plan (serving citizens living off-reservation, etc.)
- ▶ Define the concrete strategies and principles your workforce development approach will embrace to enhance the ability of the Tribal Nation(s) you serve to capably exercise their sovereignty.
- ▶ Assess the relationship between those entities who are developing the local Native workforce and those developing the local Native economy and identity and implement concrete strategies to strengthen that relationship so the two work in concert.
- ▶ Expand the array of careers your approach supports based on the Nation’s current and future needs (and build the infrastructure – housing, transportation, etc. - to support it). Prioritize careers that can create additional job opportunities.