

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Years ago, one Tribal Nation in the Northeast established a higher education scholarship program to help its young people defray the costs of attending college. But there was a catch – if they agreed to accept a scholarship from the Nation, they had to return to their reservation community upon obtaining their degrees to work for the Nation for at least two years. According to a leader of that Nation, “Our underlying goal was that they would come home and during those two years they would find a sweetheart, start a family, settle down, and never leave. It’s working.”¹

Another Tribal Nation in Alaska does something similar with its higher education scholarship program for similar reasons, requiring the students it supports to come home upon graduation to work with the community’s youth for at least one summer (in exchange for the \$500 scholarship they received each semester while in school). This not only enables the college graduates to reconnect to their Nation’s culture and lifeways (which is especially critical for those who grew up outside of the community), it enables the youth they work with to expand their visions of “what is possible,” inspiring them to “likewise pursue higher education.”²

Scholarship for service is a growing Indian Country strategy. In another example, a Tribal Nation in the Southwest requires students to work for its economic development corporation or one of its subsidiaries for one year for each year of financial support they receive. When they are not in school, they are placed in paid internships to gain practical experience learning the business ropes.³ Meanwhile, another Nation in the Upper Midwest has launched a highly selective program that fully supports three tribal citizens in obtaining a master’s degree in tribal administration and governance on the condition that they work for the Nation for two years for every year they are in school. If they don’t complete the three-year degree, then they must repay the Nation the tuition dollars it spent on them.⁴

These and other strategies speak to the importance – not just financial, but more importantly economic, social, and cultural – of Tribal Nations making concerted efforts to get a significant and lasting “return” on the investments they are making to develop their people (whether through vocational training, scholarship funding, paid fellowships and internships, or other ways). All things being equal, the majority of those people would prefer to work and live in their tribal communities.⁵ Tribal Nations can **close this loop** by deploying strategies specifically designed to fully tap into the human capacity they are cultivating with the typically limited resources they have. For example, they can create a strong system of economic incentives (financial support for education, automatic hiring or hiring

“However long it takes to go to school, you’re going to give those years back to your tribe by signing off on the contract we have for you. If it takes you four or five years to get that accounting degree, you’re going to give four or five years back to your tribe.”

– CHRISTOPHER MUÑOZ, CEO, TIGUA INC.⁶

preference, competitive wages, etc.) aimed at keeping tribal citizens at home or attracting them back home once they have finished the college degree, certificate, or credentialing programs they have supported them in completing. More and more Tribal Nations are taking it a targeted step further by supporting citizens in obtaining degrees, certifications, credentials, tangible skills, and hands-on work experience in their most urgently needed fields (e.g., natural resource management, finance, healthcare, education, etc.) and then directly channeling those individuals into specific positions working for tribal government or tribal enterprises in those fields where they directly apply what they’ve learned on their Nations’ behalf.

Closing the loop demands that Tribal Nations retain their working career professionals not only through strong hiring and financial incentives, but also through quality-of-life incentives. For example, if your Nation wishes to establish a scholarship-for-service initiative to leverage the Native talent you are developing, but there is no quality local housing for career professionals, quality local schools for their children, or public transportation system for those living outside the community in nearby towns, you will have a hard time attracting and retaining that talent. Supporting that quality of life requires Tribal Nations to make significant investments in both Native professionals and the community infrastructure needed to support them.

But these types of investments are more than proving their worth, because closing the loop not only strengthens Tribal Nations’ ability to benefit from their human capacity in targeted ways that address community needs and advance their nation-rebuilding priorities, it enables more tribal citizens to participate in culture and community, enriching and strengthening them over time.

ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ How are we providing our citizens opportunities to pursue careers working on the Nation’s behalf using the education, skills, and experience we are supporting them in obtaining? Are we training them to leave our community when we need them to stay?
- ▶ Where do our higher education scholarship recipients reside? What degrees/credentials are they acquiring? Who is benefitting from their newly acquired education, skills, and experience? Do we have a system in place to track and recruit them?
- ▶ What education, skills, and experience do our off-reservation citizens possess? What do we have/need to have in place (senior-level positions, competitive salaries/benefits, quality housing and schools, etc.) to recruit them home to serve the Nation?
- ▶ What specific positions in tribal government and tribal enterprises are most critical to our Nation’s future, and do we have a targeted plan to designate and train individual citizens to capably fill those positions?
- ▶ Do our tribal government and enterprises have remote work policies enabling tribal citizens who live outside of the community to work for those entities? Should we create such policies?
- ▶ Does our Nation have a handle on the local, non-tribal jobs that are available and will become available over the next several years? What are we doing to prepare our citizens for — and then connect them to — those jobs?

INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



Navajo Nation

In 2016, seeking to address a critical shortage of qualified Navajo doctors to provide quality, culturally appropriate healthcare to its growing population, the Navajo Nation forged an MOU with the University of Arizona’s Colleges of Medicine (UA) to create the Navajo Nation Future Physicians’ Scholarship Fund. The agreement – which the two parties renewed in 2022 for another five years – gives financial aid (through scholarships provided by Navajo’s Department of Diné Education that are matched with equal funding awarded by UA) to fully cover the tuition, fees, and related academic support costs for up to seven Navajo scholars each year as they work towards obtaining a pre-medical degree at UA’s Tucson and Phoenix campuses.¹ “Designed to prepare students from rural and economically challenged parts of Arizona to qualify for entrance to medical school”², the initiative prepares future doctors to provide care in critical-need areas of Navajo community-based healthcare specialization such as internal medicine, family medicine, obstetrics, and pediatrics.³ Fund recipients who obtain the pre-medical degree – seven Navajo Nation citizens have done so to date – earn guaranteed admission to UA’s Doctor of Medicine program and then move on to multi-year medical residencies either with Indian Health Service or hospitals in other parts of the country.⁴ They then are required to return home to the Navajo Nation to provide care to their fellow citizens, delivering the Nation a vital return on the significant educational investment it has made in them.⁵ As UA sees Navajo’s commitment to the Fund’s beneficiaries, “They are investing in you, and the way that you can repay them is serving the community.”⁶ Nearly a decade after its establishment, the Future Physicians’ Scholarship Fund is enabling Navajo students “to fulfill their aspirations of becoming physicians, while serving as role models for Navajo youth who want to follow in their footsteps.”⁷ In 2023, Navajo signed a similar MOA with UA to train Navajo citizens to become licensed medical veterinarians, addressing a critical shortage on the reservation.⁸

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

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Yakama Nation

In the early 2000s, Yakama Nation relied entirely on outside utility companies to provide power to the tribal government, tribal businesses, and reservation residents – a situation producing “no value” for the Yakama people.¹ In response, the Yakama Tribal Council created Yakama Power (YP) to “provide low-cost electric power”² to reservation power users. Serving 132 customers when it launched in 2006, today YP provides electricity to more than 3,000 customers (roughly a third of the reservation market), and in 2024 it became the first tribal entity in the U.S. to sell renewable energy directly to the federal government.³ Driving YP’s remarkable growth over the past two decades is its formal commitment to employ as many Yakama tribal members as possible to advance the “construction, management and operation of providing electric power.”⁴ To train them, YP established a nationally renowned apprenticeship program for journeymen and linemen primarily using revenues generated through its operations and supplemented by philanthropic funding.⁵ To ensure the “highest quality of workers,” the program requires its apprentices to achieve an academic standing of 80 percent in all courses, which is higher than the industry standard of 70 percent.⁶ Of the 21 apprenticeship program graduates to date, 19 subsequently gained employment with YP, earning high-paying, **prevailing wages** that “don’t exist elsewhere on the reservation” and are competitive with surrounding utilities, which helps to explain the utility’s incredibly low staff turnover rate.⁷ As of 2024, of YP’s 34 employees, 28 are Native (including 22 enrolled Yakama members), and the utility features two all-Native line crews with a third in the works.⁸ Demonstrating to the community the return on the Nation’s investment, YP purposefully schedules its line crews to perform line and pole repairs along reservation roads during tribal members’ morning and evening work commutes so they can observe firsthand tribal self-sufficiency in action – Yakama providing for its own.⁹ To advance Yakama Nation’s renewable energy priorities, YP is doubling the size of its apprenticeship program to train tribal members to become low-voltage electricians specializing in renewable energy and then hire them.¹⁰

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

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POLICY TIPS

- ▶ Identify and recruit young citizens to consider particular careers that your Nation has identified as priorities and support them in obtaining degrees in those fields.
- ▶ Establish tribal service and/or employment requirements for citizens who receive financial support from the Nation for higher education or other professional development programs.
- ▶ If aligned with your values, provide on-reservation citizens preference for the finite higher education scholarship funding you have, as they are more likely to stay/return home to work post-degree.
- ▶ Gear your workforce development programs to build human capacity in the particular fields where local jobs (including those with non-tribal employers) are (or will soon become) most plentiful.
- ▶ Implement a tracking system to follow degree-seeking citizens and match them to those jobs.
- ▶ Create a remote workers initiative to connect local tribal citizens with remote work-based jobs with non-tribal employers based outside of the community so they can work and live at home. Invest in the technological infrastructure they need to do this work.⁷
- ▶ Create a long-term professional development program to replace senior-level, non-Native employees with Native ones.⁸