

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Concerned its workforce development programs and policies were not *precisely* aligned with the needs and goals of its existing and prospective clients, a few years ago, a Native non-profit organization serving two Tribal Nations in California undertook a “Tribal Labor Force” study of their workers and would-be workers to gain a detailed, real-time picture of their employment, health, family composition, education, job skills, housing, and income status. The organization then used the study’s findings to refine its existing workforce development programs and policies and develop new ones that cater directly to the distinct, documented workforce training needs and local job opportunities of each Nation’s citizens.¹

This pilot project – designed to be a template for others across Indian Country to use – amplifies the critical importance of placing Native people being served by Native workforce development efforts at heart of the purpose, design, delivery, refinement, and growth of those efforts. Termed “citizen engagement” in this toolkit, this ongoing, iterative process is vital to ensuring that workforce development programs reflect and uphold the will and values of Native people and understand and address their specific personal and communal workforce development challenges and priorities. Simply put, if workforce development programs are to work best for Native people, they must be owned and driven by Native people.

In putting the “self” – Native people – in self-determined and self-governed Native workforce development approaches, Tribal Nations and other Native entities are deploying various innovative strategies that are predicated on *listening* to the Native communities they serve; *applying* what they have learned in the form of new, refined, or overhauled programs; and *educating* those communities about the changes they have made and why:

Listening: Tribal Nations and other Native workforce development entities must systematically work to secure the input and feedback of their participants, prospective participants, and the Native community at-large about how their programs should be structured and administered, for what community-rooted purposes, how their programs are working, and how they can work better. This learning endeavor should deploy a variety of strategies – such as community surveys, participant focus groups and questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and larger community-based strategic planning processes – to regularly update a crystal-clear picture of the service community’s workforce challenges, skills, and aspirations.

Applying: Tribal Nations and other Native workforce development entities must prioritize at an institutional level the routine analysis

“In order to change, you really need to know what it is that your community wants and to respect what their thoughts are and what they want for the future.”

– PATRICIA RIGGS, FORMER DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, YSLETA DEL SUR PUEBLO²

of the input and feedback they receive from the people they serve. They must then apply their findings to adapt, enhance, and expand the services they provide to meet the people’s complex and evolving needs. Doing it every so often when a new grant application for federal or state funding happens to be due isn’t good enough. They must comprehensively evaluate and refine their entire approaches on a regular and frequent basis if it is to provide compassionate, culturally relevant, person-centered workforce development services not just today, but tomorrow and for years to come.

Teaching: Tribal Nations and other Native workforce development entities must continuously educate the individuals they serve as well as the broader Native community in a variety of ways (websites, social media, email listservs, community events, reports to tribal council meetings open to the public, annual reports, etc.) about: (1) the workforce development services they offer; (2) changes or additions to those services based on the people’s input; (3) how those services are positively impacting the community; and (4) how they are concretely advancing the community’s long-range economic, cultural, social, and political goals. This process must also convey the types of jobs the community needs most – both today and over the long haul – and how the workforce development approach will prioritize the people’s development of the specific skills they need to secure and flourish in those jobs through targeted education and training. Looking long-term, this process must also work deliberately to move the community’s collective mindset away from “poverty” towards “prosperity”³ by teaching community members that: (1) they all have inherent potential that their Tribal Nation and others are committed to developing; (2) they all have much to contribute to the community (knowledge, skills, experience, and ideas) to grow its prosperity and self-sufficiency; and (3) they have a sacred obligation to make those contributions as tribal citizens.

ASK YOURSELF

- ▶ How are we working on a regular basis to obtain: (1) input from the Native people we serve about their workforce challenges, skills, and goals; and (2) feedback from them about the effectiveness of our workforce development efforts and how they could be improved? Are the mechanisms we use adequate for capturing the will of the people and applying what we learn from them?
- ▶ What steps can we take to more fully center and heed the voices of Native workers and would-be workers in our services?
- ▶ What do we need to learn from the Native workers and would-be workers we serve that we currently are not learning?
- ▶ Do we have sufficient capacity and a formal process for comprehensively analyzing the participant/community input and feedback we obtain and adapting and expanding our programs accordingly? If not, what steps can we take to get there?
- ▶ How regularly and in what ways do we share comprehensive updates about the progress our workforce development efforts are making with the broader community?
- ▶ Are the top political and programmatic leaders of our Tribal Nation/organization actively involved in educating the Native community we serve about the purpose and nature of our workforce development efforts and the long-range goals they are designed to achieve? How can we get them more involved?

INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



Coeur d'Alene Tribe (CDAT)

In the mid-2000s, CDAT faced a troubling education and workforce development landscape: just a third of its youth graduated high school, a high percentage of younger working-age tribal members worked and lived elsewhere, and the Tribe had little control over what its people learned and how.¹ In response, in 2007 its Department of Education (DOE) created the “Education Pipeline,” a **cradle-to-career** support system for CDAT members as they move from one educational stage to the next, with the ultimate goal to have them become productive, culturally grounded members of the local community.² Enriched with programmatic innovations ever since, the Pipeline instills in tribal members an abiding commitment “to serve as tribal advocates”³ for the Coeur d’Alene people, land, and waters – and prepares them to fulfill that commitment. This includes CDAT’s schitsu’umsh Scholars Program, an immersive learning experience for students in grades 8-12 during the school year that “deepens [their] relationship with their homeland, while understanding how legal and political conflicts impact environmental and community health.”⁴ Featuring “Scholarship Saturdays” and intergenerational mentoring sessions, the program raises students’ “critical consciousness” as “positive change agents through their academic achievement.”⁵ DOE also offers a summer internship program for middle and high school students similarly rooted in Coeur d’Alene’s history and core values, among them “Membership” – that “we be responsible, informed members...prepared to lead and serve.”⁶ Increasingly equipped with “a strong sense of who they are”⁷, the number of CDAT students obtaining college degrees has tripled since 2018, with a growing number pursuing graduate school.⁸ To further nurture its people’s civic readiness, CDAT has forged curriculum co-design **MOUs** with several colleges and universities; for example, CDAT and other area Tribal Nations partnered with Washington State University to create the Tribal Nation Building Leadership Program, which develops students’ “leadership skills and knowledge grounded in cultural principles, practices, and values.”⁹ CDAT also has developed professional development pipelines in two critical need fields (teacher education and healthcare), and its Department of Natural Resources is hiring additional tribal members to help CDAT restore and revitalize its land and waters.¹⁰

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

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Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa

For years, Red Cliff’s workforce development efforts were hampered by poor federal data that painted an inaccurate picture of its workforce and hindered its ability to secure adequate funding to grow that workforce in self-determined ways.¹ In response, in 2018 Red Cliff conducted its first Tribal Census of reservation households to “support program design,” “assess the efficacy of newly developed programs, attract funding from a diverse array of sources, and... deepen cooperation between tribal leadership and tribal departments and programs.”² It also gathered precise data about Red Cliff’s “employment landscape, challenges, and opportunities.”³ Deployed over several months, the Census generated a 97 percent response rate through a campaign featuring online and paper survey options, Census staff going door to door to help Band members complete surveys, promotional door hangers, gift cards to tribal businesses, and larger raffle prizes for participating.⁴ Among its key data points: a 23 percent unemployment rate, available jobs highly concentrated in Red Cliff’s programs and casino, Band members’ strong desire for “new, different, or additional employment,” and pervasive childcare and transportation challenges that hindered training and employment.⁵ The Census directly informed Red Cliff’s member-driven, 20-year Comprehensive Plan, which includes goals of partnering with higher education institutions to create education and training opportunities for Band members, recruiting recent Red Cliff college graduates for tribal jobs, instituting effective employee retention strategies, and creating a “no wrong door” approach to workforce development service delivery across governmental divisions.⁶ Administered again in 2023 to generate longitudinal data, the Census has enabled the Band to increase its federal funding to advance its priorities, notably: building an Ojibwe language teacher/cultural practitioner workforce, targeted investments to cultivate small business owners, expanding its child care options beyond center-based care, establishing a 477 Program, and hiring an Education Division Administrator to lead that effort.⁷

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

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POLICY TIPS

- ▶ **Listening:** Administer a formal consultation process with the community to develop a community-based definition of the ideal Native *citizen* (not just worker) your workforce development approach will cultivate and how they will contribute to the community.
- ▶ **Listening:** Regularly convene public hearings, focus groups, and program participant advisory groups to learn how effective your workforce development efforts are and how they could be improved.
- ▶ **Listening:** Use “captive audience” opportunities to obtain key input and information from the community (mandatory questionnaires when tribal citizens update their tribal enrollment, booths at community events, etc.).
- ▶ **Applying:** Conduct routine “program enhancement” surveys of program participants and incentivize them to participate by providing modest rewards (gas vouchers, gift cards, etc.); share results with programmatic *and* political leaders to refine programs.
- ▶ **Teaching:** Implement multi-pronged, ongoing marketing campaigns to inform the community about your new and revamped workforce development initiatives, how they work, and how they will benefit them individually and collectively.
- ▶ **Teaching:** Develop a formal social media policy to share key program updates and job openings with the community in real time.
- ▶ **Teaching:** Deploy concrete strategies to document and share stories of successful program participants.