



INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: Potawatomi Bands of Southwest Michigan

In 2019, Western Michigan University (WMU) adopted a formal statement recognizing its location within the enduring ancestral territory of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi, and Pokagon Band of Potawatomi.¹ The statement led WMU to establish its Native American Affairs Council (NAAC), which the three bands leveraged to tackle a common, longstanding challenge: the lack of locally available, tribally informed, and culturally relevant leadership development curricula for their emerging political and programmatic leaders.² Through the NAAC, the bands partnered with WMU to co-design and “co-govern” its Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance, a graduate-level course series officially endorsed by the bands and tailored to their specific histories, governance systems, and governance and economic development capacity-building priorities.³ The program provides “a comprehensive understanding of the legal and cultural history” of the bands, their treaty rights and governance systems, their business entities, and how they relate to other governments.⁴ It also “develops hands-on skills to assess and address the economic, managerial, and societal challenges of tribal governance”⁵, with a particular emphasis on the skills that tribal leaders and senior-level administrators and managers need to do their jobs effectively.⁶ The bands each fill five slots in each program cohort; their governments and enterprises nominate existing employees to participate as part of their ongoing professional development as well as community members who display professional promise, with their enrollment costs covered by tribal higher education scholarships. Any remaining slots are opened up to non-Native professionals employed by local governments and organizations that work with one or more of the bands.⁷ Participants are chosen based on the primary focus area of that year’s cohort (tribal government, gaming enterprises, or non-gaming enterprises) and they are required to collaboratively design “service-learning” capstone projects to implement on the bands’ behalf upon program completion.⁸ A growing number of program graduates are subsequently running for tribal elected office or being promoted into program director or senior manager roles within the bands’ governments and enterprises.⁹

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RELATED RESOURCES

[Western Michigan University \(WMU\) Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance \(TGVC\)](#)

[WMU Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance: Program Flyer and Overview of Courses](#)

[WMU News: WMU partners with local tribes to create tribal governance graduate certificate](#)

[MLive.com: Western Michigan University introduces graduate certificate in tribal governance](#)

[Evergreen State College: Master of Public Administration – Tribal Governance](#)

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- ¹ WMU’s land acknowledgment statement states in part, “We would like to recognize that Western Michigan University is located on lands historically occupied by the Ojibwe, Odawa and Bodewadmi nations. Please take a moment to acknowledge and honor this ancestral land of the Three Fires Confederacy, the sacred lands of all Indigenous peoples and their continued presence” (WMU, “About WMU” webpage (<https://wmich.edu/about>, accessed April 2, 2025).
- ² According to Sam Morseau, Council Secretary for the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, who also serves as Professional Instructor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at WMU, “There’s not a lot of education on tribal governance and tribal history. Then, most of the time when programs are created, or curriculum is created, it is strictly created on the academic side, and *then* they reach out in terms of consultation to the local tribes” (Margot Amouyal, “Western Michigan University partners with 3 tribes on graduate tribal governance certificate,” Investing in Native Communities: A joint project of Native Americans in Philanthropy and Candid, April 13, 2023 (<https://nativephilanthropy.candid.org/news/western-michigan-university-partners-with-3-tribes-on-graduate-tribal-governance-certificate/>, accessed March 28, 2025)).
- ³ Kayla Lambert, “WMU partners with local tribes to create tribal governance graduate certificate,” WMU News, December 7, 2023 (<https://wmich.edu/news/2023/12/73676>, accessed March 28, 2025). Although modeled after the Master of Public Administration in Tribal Governance program at Evergreen State College in Washington, the WMU program “is unique because it is fully endorsed by three local tribal nations” (Amouyal, April 13, 2023). According to Morseau, while the three bands had previously been spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on outside entities on professional development for emerging tribal leaders and aspiring senior-level tribal employees, the WMU program has enabled the bands to begin to “bring that professional development in-house” (Conversation with NCAI, March 27, 2025).
- ⁴ WMU, “Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance (TGVC)” webpage, School of Public Affairs and Administration (<https://wmich.edu/spaa/academics/tribalgov>, accessed March 28, 2025).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Lambert, December 7, 2023. To complete the 12-credit program, students must take two required, three-credit courses: (1) Tribal Governance: Sovereignty Through Self-Determination, which introduces “theoretical and practical applications of governance from an indigenous perspective” and articulates “how roles in government-to government relationships impact policy decision-making and administration”; and (2) Foundations of Federal Indian Policy, which situates “the operation, policies, and programs of the self-governing Tribal Nations in the larger legal and policy context of the United States” (WMU, *Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance*, Program Flyer and Overview of Courses, 2023, p. 4 (<https://files.wmich.edu/s3fs-public/attachments/u878/2023/Tribal%20Governance%20Info.pdf>, accessed March 28, 2025). They then must take two elective courses, with options including Tribal Development and Diversification (which “provides a foundational understanding necessary to promote, advocate for, and contribute to diversifying the economic development in tribal nations”), Social Entrepreneurship & Innovation, Managing Community Growth and Development, and Strategic Planning & Performance Management (Ibid.).
- ⁷ Morseau, Conversation with NCAI, March 27, 2025.
- ⁸ WMU, *Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance*, Program Flyer and Overview of Courses, 2023, p. 1; Morseau, Conversation with NCAI, March 27, 2025; WSJM.com, “WMU Approves Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance,” April 13, 2023 (<https://www.moodyonthemarket.com/wmu-approves-graduate-certificate-in-tribal-governance/>, accessed March 28, 2025). One capstone project involved two staff members of the Pokagon Band Department of Education and a staff member of LifeTech Academy, who collaborated to design and launch a hybrid kindergarten at Pokagon’s Zagbegan Academy (Morseau, Email correspondence with NCAI, April 1, 2025).
- ⁹ Morseau, Conversation with NCAI, March 27, 2025.