



NCAI conference attendees complete a survey designed to inform tribal nations' efforts to build their data capacity. (Photo: NCAI)

"We now go above and beyond federal requirements to see what we need to be collecting and analyzing to see the change that we know is needed here."

– Elva "Cookie" Allan, Comprehensive Planning Consultant, Coeur d'Alene Tribe

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Years ago, one tribal nation, unhappy with the lack of progress its citizens who relied on TANF were making, took over administration of the program from the state. It initiated its own assessment of its newly inherited TANF clients, discovering that a full 40 percent of them had disabilities, and most of those had learning disabilities. The data also confirmed that these disabilities often factored into clients' non-compliance with program requirements, which resulted in fines and, in turn, a spike in dire need applications by those clients, who now get routed to the nation's TVR program for the specialized support they need to prepare for employment.

This example illustrates what tribal nations have long understood: assessment – what is being evaluated, how, how often, by whom, and for what ultimate purpose – matters. What results from it can make all the difference between an ill-informed and shortsighted approach to workforce development and a well-informed, strategically driven, and impactful one. A primary reason for the former has been that outsiders – primarily federal and state governments – have long sat in the driver's seat when it comes to generating data about Native people generally, and the progress made by those who access workforce education, training, and related services specifically.

The inherent shortcomings of federal data sources – the Census, ACS, and the various criteria the federal government uses to measure its definition of program "success" – are many and well-documented. For example, they are ill-equipped to gauge the true severity of the challenges facing tribal workforce development, nor do they properly account for those "invisible" tribal citizens who aren't looking for work, what skills and education they may have, and what skills and education they need to gain to secure employment.¹ As one workforce development practitioner explains, "Conditions affecting Indian workers in reservation markets can often be very different than those for non-Indians in urban areas, differences which are not recognized in standard labor market research efforts."² Because federal data doesn't accurately capture Indian Country's labor force realities, federal decision-makers struggle to devise effective solutions to address them.

For tribal nations to develop effective local workforce development approaches, they need to *drive the data* that informs them. Since they know their own communities and conditions best, they are best positioned to collect the data and assess what it means *for them*. Because it's *their* people and futures at stake, they know the right questions to ask – questions that outsiders wouldn't think to pose. Leading in this way also enables them "to incorporate cultural, contextual, and political concerns in program evaluation," and it enhances "self-determination over program activities."³

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Does your nation regularly assess the true unemployment rate of tribal citizens in and around your reservation, including those who can work but aren't seeking employment (and why)? What would it take to develop such a mechanism?
- Do/how do your workforce development and related programs collect, analyze, and share data? Are these processes useful? Could they be enhanced to better inform *tribal* decision-making?
- Assess your programs and the linkages between them using a SWOT analysis: Are they doing what your nation needs to achieve its definition of "success"? Are they fostering or inhibiting innovation?
- Considering your nation's long-range economic and community development priorities, what kinds of jobs will it require 5-10 years from now? How many? And are you people prepared to fill them?
- How many people is our workforce development approach currently serving? Is it serving everyone it needs to? Given our growing population and strategic priorities, how many people will it need to serve 5-10 years from now, and how will we pay for it?

INNOVATION SNAPSHOTS



Coeur d'Alene Tribe (CDA)

In the mid 2000s, many CDA members faced an "educational achievement gap" that inhibited their ability to enter and advance in the workforce. In response, CDA decision makers created the Tribe's "Education Pipeline," a holistic approach fusing education with workforce development. Key to the Pipeline's success – which has proven effective in closing CDA's educational gap – is its commitment to own its own data. Whereas before much of the data CDA collected was based on someone else's criteria and for someone else's benefit (i.e., the federal government), today CDA's Department of Education

(DOE) occupies the driver's seat, ensuring that it's learning what *it* needs to develop solutions customized to tribal members' particular needs and the Tribe's priorities. DOE tracks the status and progress of all members from pre-school through Ph.D., from where they are being schooled to the specific support programs they rely on¹, and it now asks new and different questions through its data collection processes. Recognizing the data needs strengthening the Pipeline will entail, DOE is partnering with area universities to cultivate degree-bearing "research cohorts" of CDA members who can build its research capacity over time.²

LEARNING LINK: <http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-coeur-dalene>

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Rosebud Sioux Tribe (RST)

Confronting an 83% unemployment rate and 44% poverty rate among tribal members, RST resolved to comprehensively evaluate the current state of its economy, the current state of education among its people, and what they collectively mean for the Tribe's ability to improve on those rates. RST's economic development corporation REDCO produced the Tribe's first "State of Future Workforce" report, what it calls "an honest assessment" that recognizes the "symbiotic" relationship between a well-educated workforce and RST's ability to build a strong, sustainable economy for the next seven

generations.¹ Among other things, the report found "a high need" to strengthen basic math, writing, and communication skills among RST members to make them workforce ready.² The data generated through the report has equipped REDCO and RST with the information they need to develop short-, medium-, and long-range actionable goals for cultivating a stronger workforce and economy, such as establishing robust career and internship program for youth and adults, creating strong partnerships with one another and other entities to "close sustainability gaps such as public transportation and data collection," and ensuring that RST's economic activities and the local education system enact and reflect the Tribe's cultural values.³

LEARNING LINK: <http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-rosebud>

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Comprehensively assess your programs and what kinds of data they collect, about and for whom, and for what reasons. Determine how useful this data is for informing your nation-building efforts.
- Dedicate permanent funding for staff and operations to drive the nation's data efforts.
- Build a centralized data system that collates data/shares results among all service components of tribal government/enterprises to create a clear picture of the needs of/services provided to citizens.
- Institute a regular tribal census that gauges your citizens' current workforce readiness and what education/skills they need to obtain to contribute to the nation's building of a prosperous future.
- Develop a picture of the current and projected tribal/local labor market – and a process for updating it. Engage tribal/local employers to gather data about their long-range labor needs.
- Driving data poses a resource challenge, but more and more tribal nations have developed creative solutions to learn what they need with limited dollars. Build partnerships with area TCUs – and other nations if possible – to help with data design, collection and analysis and defray the costs.