STRATEGIC VISION Matters

Framing the Discussion

A few years ago, the leaders and education directors of several tribal nations met with board members of the local school system that was educating the majority of their nations’ youth. Among the nations’ pressing concerns was the fact that 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 flipped to the tribal representatives in attendance: “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 workforce development activities weren’t intentionally advancing what they had identified as a strategic priority—and the need to connect the two. Across Indian Country, the success of Native nation rebuilding efforts hinges on such strategic vision, or “strategic orientation.”1 In workforce development, vision is forged when the nation has a clear, widely understood sense of the future it seeks to create for itself—Native people teaching their own, for instance—and makes and implements decisions about how to build its human capacity based on long-term priorities the nation considers vital to creating that future.

For example, one nation has structured its workforce development activities to advance its overarching goal of creating tribal citizens capable of contributing to the nation over the entirety of their lives. Another nation prioritizes on-reservation citizens in its higher education scholarship funding in order to support its strategic commitment to reversing “brain drain” so that it has the local human capacity it needs to accomplish its long-term nation-rebuilding goals.

As a tribal nation crafts its workforce development approach, its success will depend on whether it does so with a greater, national purpose in mind. Tethering that approach to its community development imperatives requires addressing some key structural considerations, among them: (1) syncing the nation’s workforce development approach with its economy building effort: to ensure it has the right human capacity to achieve the latter; (2) focusing on preparing people to build careers: as opposed to just getting jobs, thus enhancing upward mobility and community prosperity over time; (3) diversifying the careers people prepare for: beyond public sector careers that typically don’t create jobs to private sector careers—like working in tribal enterprises or as small business owners—that can create jobs; (4) defining the reach of the nation’s approach: and whether/how it will serve tribal citizens living off reservation; and (5) ensuring the nation’s strategic priorities drive funding for workforce development: and not vice versa.

Questions to Consider

• Does your 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 your nation preparing its people to help it reach that destination?

• Is the overarching mission of your nation’s workforce development approach? What sort of future is it trying to create for the nation and its people, both individually and collectively?

• Is your workforce development approach consciously structured and operated to advance your nation’s long-term nation-rebuilding priorities? If not, what do you need to do to ensure that it is?

• As a tribal leader/workforce development practitioner, are the decisions I am making and the work I am doing each day to build the nation’s human capacity furthering those priorities?

• How are you working to grow/adapt our workforce development approach over time to ensure that it continues to further the nation’s strategic priorities? How are you accounting for the growth of your nation’s population?

Innovation Snapshots

Nez Perce Tribe

In 1998, the Nez Perce Tribe officially designated education as a strategic priority vital to strengthening its ability to maintain Nez Perce’s cultural lifeways. To that end, in 1999 the Tribe aligned its 477 Plan with its overall education strategy to forge a partnership with Northwest Indian College (NWIC). The two soon established an MOA to bring “the delivery of higher education and community development services”2 to two Nez Perce communities, effectively creating the first tribal college in Idaho. The arrangement provides “place-bound” tribal members—many first-generation college students—access to a quality, culturally appropriate, local higher education they otherwise wouldn’t have.3 In addition to a Direct Transfer associate’s degree, local students can pursue Tribal Governance & Business Management bachelor’s and Native Environmental Science associate’s and bachelor’s degrees through NWIC—two fields Nez Perce has deemed critical to developing its workforce to preserve its cultural lifeways for future generations.4 To date, NWIC has awarded 114 degrees to reservation-based tribal members, helping to foster a nearly 70% increase in higher educational attainment at Nez Perce since 2000.5

LEARNING LINK: http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-nezperce
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Owens Valley Career Development Center (OVDC)

In 2014, OVDC was struggling to get its Tribal TANF program clients across its six-county service area to meet their mandatory work participation rates. In response, OVDC staff developed its Economic Development Initiative Strategic Framework (EDISF) from scratch. This long-term action plan seeks to end OVDC clients’ dependency on government benefits by preparing them for employment while at the same time fostering partnerships with local organizations and businesses to increase the job opportunities they can pursue. Advancing six overarching goals—from tribal cultural awareness to funding diversification—EDISF delineates concrete action steps for each goal, reinforced by a “logic model” that outlines staff members’ activities, outcomes, and measurable outcomes that they must achieve.6 EDISF mandates quarterly data tracking of OVDC’s progress, enabling staff to regularly evaluate and strengthen their work. As OVDC explains, it allows staff “to communicate, collaborate, and form those internal partnerships that are really the focal point of what we should be doing for the results that our clients need.”7 EDISF is already bearing fruit, as OVDC’s cash assistance caseload has declined by 16% over three years, with caseload closures due to employment and/or excess earnings increasing 15% over the same period of time.8

LEARNING LINK: http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development-ovdcd
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Policy Recommendations

• Develop a long-term strategic plan for the nation and delineate where and how your workforce development efforts will fit into that plan—and further it in concrete ways.

• Define the breadth and depth of your workforce development approach in order to advance that plan (on- versus off-reservation, serving citizens living in urban centers, etc.)

• Treat workforce development as a multi-generational proposition: Don’t focus only on citizens who need jobs and ignore those now—ensure your approach fosters the next generation your nation seeks to create.

• Evaluate your current workforce development programs to determine whether they are oriented to advancing the nation’s long-term nation-rebuilding goals.

• Assess the relationship between the nation’s approaches to workforce development and economic development and work to strengthen it by developing strategies that make the two work in unison.

• Expand the array of careers your approach supports based on the nation’s current and future needs—with an emphasis with seedling careers that can create additional job opportunities.