FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Wrestling with a high dropout rate among its high school students that hampered their ability to enter and thrive in the workforce later in life, one tribal nation in the Pacific Northwest decided to make a preemptive move. It created a summer “pre-employment” training program for tribal youth ages 13-15 that promotes the development of personal accountability, work ethic, and “pride in community.” This “hands-on” initiative encourages participants to stay in school by teaching them a “multitude of transferable skills they can apply to later employment” for the nation or elsewhere. A growing number are doing so, with many moving on to higher education.

This nation is among many who are realizing that if they are to develop their human capacity in order to create brighter futures of their own design, then they need to start young. Taking action, they are developing “first-chance” academic and workforce preparedness programs” that target youth ages 13-15 providing them the chance to explore different careers (and the hard work involved with building them); cultivate their desire, confidence, and ability to pursue them; and deepen their appreciation of their role as citizens of their nations – and contributors to their nation’s futures. These initiatives (internships, fellowships, summer camps, job shadowing, etc.) help to raise tribal nations’ expectations of their young people, heighten young people’s expectations of themselves, and support young people as they strive to meet those expectations.

If the federal government’s design of workforce development programs has taught us anything, it’s that one-size-fits-all approaches don’t work well for tribal nations given their distinct challenges and objectives. Tribal nations are finding success when they take the reins and develop targeted solutions customized to their needs and their people, from youth to mid-career professionals to aspiring citizen educators. These solutions take many forms and serve many purposes, but NCAI’s research illuminates three trends – targeted solutions that: (1) serve particular groups (youth, single mothers, former felons, etc.) by neutralizing the specific workforce challenges that impact them in certain ways; (2) build particular skills and expertise among the nation’s citizens that address its critical needs and advance its long-range priorities; and (3) identify the structural trouble spots that inhibit workforce development/growth and design structural interventions to tackle them. NCAI’s research also reveals that a nation’s ability to forge such solutions hinges on its capacity to engage in a comprehensive workforce development approach that flows from its assessment-informed understanding (see pages 22-23) of its people, their needs and aspirations, the nation’s needs and priorities, and how its approach will deliberately target and address those things.

TARGETED SOLUTIONS Matter

INNOVATION SNAPSHOT

Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC)
The Yakama, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Nez Perce tribes established CRITFC in 1977 to ensure a strong, “unified” tribal voice in managing the Columbia River salmon and the ecosystem upon which they depend. CRITFC advances this mission in part through its multifaceted approach to develop a skilled workforce by creating opportunities for tribal members to obtain the college education and technical expertise needed to work in STEM-related fields at the core of day-to-day fisheries work. Supporting students from elementary school through post-graduate levels, CRITFC’s place-based curriculum “provides hands-on, experiential learning, “intergenerational mentoring,” and “positive cultural identity development.” Students witness effective tribal decision making and observe their own innovative tribal programs at work where it matters most: their homelands. To foster a pathway to STEM-based careers, CRITFC launched its Salmon Camp for students to explore these fields at a young age (grades 6-8). Its TRAIL Project provides college students with summer and academic year internships where they gain invaluable research experience. TRAIL’s goal is to propel interns to obtain degrees in fisheries and related fields at universities where the tribes have MOUs. As CRITFC explains, “These aren’t training programs to nowhere. We have jobs waiting at the end of this pathway.”

CONNECT: Charles Hudson, Intergovernmental Affairs Director, CRITFC, hudson@critfc.org

Muscogee (Creek) Nation (MCN)
Concerned the State of Oklahoma wasn’t doing enough to prepare its people who were leaving prison for life outside of it, in 2004 MCN established its Reintegration Program (RIP). Believing all of its participants are capable of becoming productive, productive citizens, RIP provides them a holistic array of culturally-based support services before, during, and after their re-entry into society. RIP case managers work closely with participants to eliminate their barriers to employment through GED acquisition, training, resume preparation, and connecting them with offender-friendly employers. When they are between jobs, RIP expects participants to volunteer for community service (mowing MCN elders’ lawns and moving families’ furniture are typical projects). RIP also maintains several partnerships designed to help participants address their “life-sustaining needs” such as housing, clothing, and groceries so they have a stable foundation upon which to get and keep a job. Whereas Oklahoma’s recidivism rate for Native offenders is 30 percent, RIP’s recidivism rate is just 10 percent. According to RIP, “We strengthen our sovereignty by addressing the needs of a population that oftentimes are denied basic services because of a felony conviction.”

CONNECT: Tony Fish, Manager, Muscogee (Creek) Nation Reintegration Program, tofish@mcn-nsn.gov

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

• What steps is your nation taking to assess the specific workforce challenges of specific groups within the nation and design customized solutions to address them? Could it be doing more?
• What particular skills and careers does the nation need now and in the future, and what steps is it taking to cultivate them among their people?
• What is your nation doing to cultivate tribal citizens to become employers as well as employees (by becoming owners and operators of small businesses in and around the community)? What steps can it take to build a system that can prepare them to assume that role?
• How is your nation partnering with local college(s), Native CDFIs, and other partners to develop specialized curricula geared towards particular fields of need or particular groups within the community and their learning challenges? How could it strengthen/expand these partnerships?
• Are there targeted, cost-effective workforce development solutions that your nation could create through partnerships with other tribal nations? How could those partnerships be cultivated?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

• Assess how severely specific workforce development challenges (see page 4) are impacting certain groups in your nation and design/refine your programs to comprehensively combat them.
• Use your nation’s long-term priorities and local/regional economic forecasts as primary decision-making criteria to target the nation’s workforce development investments in specific ways (for example, building your human capacity in the area of business development, etc.).
• Develop stand-alone initiatives that provide Native youth academic and workforce preparedness training and opportunities for career exploration before they reach high school. If necessary, develop partnerships to defray the cost of doing so.
• Develop targeted family-based approaches to workforce development that involve clients’ family members to help ensure healthy career planning and career sustainability.
• Develop a coalition-based plan (with academic institutions, CDFIs, etc.) to cultivate aspiring citizen entrepreneurs to become small business owners (which also increases local job opportunities).

TARGETED SOLUTIONS

WORKFORCE

DEVELOPMENT

TOOLKIT