



## Tribal Workforce Development: An Introduction

*“Innovation is the springboard of the good things that have happened in Indian Country for so many years. It’s innovation from the tribal level up that drives development...”*

*– Norm DeWeaver, Former National Representative,  
Indian and Native American Employment and Training Coalition<sup>1</sup>*

A movement is sweeping across Indian Country. Over the past several decades, a growing number of tribal nations have reclaimed their right to govern their own affairs and places, and are slowly but surely charting brighter futures of their own making. Wrestling primary-decision making authority away from the federal government, they are “addressing severe social problems, building sustainable economies, and reinvigorating their cultures, languages, and ways of life.”<sup>2</sup> In the process, they are affirming what Native peoples have always known – that tribal self-determination and self-governance is the *only* policy capable of improving their lives and the quality of life in their communities.<sup>3</sup>

This movement, commonly referred to as “Native nation rebuilding,” has been described by one prominent Native scholar as “a revolution of the spirit.”<sup>4</sup> For most tribal leaders, employees, and citizens, this process requires *decolonizing* and *redesigning* the governance systems and tools upon which their nations have long relied. This is perhaps nowhere more critical than with *workforce development* – how a tribal nation grows the capacity of its people to lead productive, satisfying lives and contribute meaningfully to the cultural, social, and economic life of the nation in order to sustain it for generations to come.

For tribal nations, workforce development is not simply about helping a tribal citizen get and keep a job. It’s not just about reducing the reservation unemployment rate. Certainly, those things are important. However, for tribal nations, workforce development is about so much more. It is about identifying and creating opportunities and then preparing their citizens to seize those opportunities through the forging of difference-making careers that strengthen not just the citizens but their families. It is about revitalizing tribal societies, communities, and cultures. It is about eradicating despair and dependency, and fostering self-sufficiency and hope in their stead.

NCAI’s research confirms that achieving “success” in workforce development comes down, ultimately, to *what tribal nations do*. It depends primarily on a tribal nation’s willingness and ability to claim and exercise true ownership over the initiatives, programs, services, and activities dedicated to cultivating the minds, skills, and expertise of its people, how those things are structured, and for what overarching purposes. It hinges above all else on *tribal innovation from the ground up and the inside out* – tribal nations discarding uniform approaches designed by outsiders such as the federal government, and creating in their place distinctly *tribal* approaches that make sense to them based on their particular cultures, values, challenges, circumstances, and priorities.

The benefits can be transformational. As NCAI’s Policy Research Center concluded in 2012, self-governed “tribal investments in higher education and workforce development have multiple and far-reaching benefits that extend beyond individuals – that equip tribes to exercise their sovereignty as governments and to serve both the socioeconomic and cultural interests of their citizens.”<sup>5</sup>

### The Toolkit: Purpose and Function

This toolkit is designed for tribal leaders, workforce development practitioners, and other key decision-makers responsible for tackling the daunting and complex task of evaluating, refining, expanding, and in some cases, completely overhauling the workforce development approaches for which they are responsible. This toolkit does not focus on how tribal policy makers can more efficiently run individual workforce development programs on a daily basis, better navigate the 477 financial reporting process, develop greater proficiency using WIOA’s BearTracks data management system, or other operational aspects common to workforce development. Instead, it seeks to frame and inform *strategic decision making* by tribal policy makers at a foundational, nation-rebuilding level by providing them a comprehensive lens through which they can identify, develop, and implement effective, sustainable workforce development solutions tailored to their distinct needs and ends.