

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIAN COUNTRY: THE CHALLENGES

The workforce development challenges facing tribal governments, Native organizations, and tribal colleges and universities are arguably more daunting and complex than those facing other governments anywhere else in the world. But as this toolkit illustrates, *these challenges are in no way insurmountable*, and a growing number of tribal nations are crafting effective solutions to overcome them.

Below is a categorized list of the common challenges facing Indian Country workforce development. It is a helpful tool in identifying and accounting for specific challenges that tribal workforce development approaches should address. NCAI compiled this list through a survey of nearly 40 tribal leaders and workforce development practitioners in 2015, as well as from other sources. It is worth noting that the variety and gravity of challenges that each tribal nation faces is different, and not all contend with every one listed below.<sup>1</sup>

### SOCIAL CHALLENGES

- **Deep, longstanding poverty:** and attendant social ills such as homelessness
- **Low education attainment levels:** graduating high school, obtaining college/advanced degrees, etc.
- **Inadequate/countercultural local education systems:** which inhibit educational attainment by Native people
- **Lack of preparedness for higher education:** which requires developmental education to ensure readiness
- **Lack of industry-required hard skills, credentials, and work experience:** making it hard to compete for local jobs
- **Limited/lack of soft skills:** necessary to keep a job
- **Citizens' low self-confidence:** in their own abilities
- **Inadequate technological skills:** computer literacy, etc.
- **Lack of work ethic:** Due to longtime scarcity of jobs, many in the community have not worked much or at all, and thus aren't motivated to find work or prepare to get it.
- **Few professional role models:** in the home or community
- **Substance/alcohol abuse/addiction:** making people unhireable or making it hard for them to keep their jobs
- **Mental/behavioral health issues:** borne of colonial trauma and other factors
- **Individual and family health issues:** which interfere with individual's ability to find/maintain employment
- **Lack of driver's licenses:** making transportation to and from work – and workforce education/training – difficult, and keeping people from obtaining jobs requiring driving.
- **Criminal records:** in particular felony convictions that make gaining work experience and finding sustainable employment difficult
- **Past work experience issues:** making it hard for individuals to get hired again

- **Dependency mentality:** Borne of age-old federal policies, some in tribal communities feel as if tribal government should take care of all of their needs.
- **"Crabs in the bucket" dynamic:** which infects workplaces and inhibits career advancement
- **Entitlement and other negative workplace attitudes:** which inhibit one's drive for professional development and advancement, and can even lead to job termination
- **Predatory lending:** which saps individuals of ability to cover basic necessities from job income they receive
- **Rapidly growing Native populations:** and the need for workforce development efforts to keep pace

### COMMUNAL CHALLENGES

- **Severe unemployment:** straining limited tribal resources
- **Not enough local job/career opportunities:** to go around
- **Few private sector job opportunities:** with most available jobs found in tribal government and tribal enterprises, thus limiting career options
- **Inadequate "living wage" job opportunities:** making it hard to make ends meet
- **Low labor force participation:** with many in tribal communities not actively seeking employment, rendering them "invisible" to official federal unemployment rate calculations.<sup>2</sup>
- **Lack of permanent, career-based jobs:** featuring career advancement opportunities (versus entry-level or short-term jobs)
- **An aging existing workforce:** where senior positions in tribal government and businesses are held by people nearing retirement age, leaving critical voids to fill
- **Tribal workforce unqualified for senior positions:** difficulty finding Native people to fill senior management jobs as they don't have the needed skills and experience
- **Limited local higher education, vocational, and professional development training opportunities:** to gain critically needed knowledge and skills
- **Lack of apprenticeship opportunities:** in skilled trades
- **Employment discrimination:** against qualified Native workers by off-reservation, non-Native employers
- **Lack of accessible, reliable, affordable childcare:** which can make keeping a job hard, especially for single parents
- **Lack of short-term housing assistance:** for those engaged in workforce education and training
- **Lack of support for would-be citizen entrepreneurs:** through training and investments in individuals seeking to start their own small businesses, which can expand the size and diversity of the local tribal workforce

### ENVIRONMENTAL

- **Lack of physical infrastructure:** workforce education and training facilities, commercial space for citizen entrepreneurs to locate their businesses, etc.
- **Inadequate housing:** to house those seeking work on the reservation

- **Inadequate broadband internet connectivity:** to support online workforce education/training
- **Lack of accessible, affordable, reliable transportation:** to commute to work or workforce education/training
- **Increasing costs of higher education:** making it increasingly difficult for individuals to afford it – and for tribal governments to share/cover costs
- **“Brain drain” dynamic:** making it hard for a tribal nation to retain/attract its highly skilled and educated citizens

### POLITICAL

- **Political interference:** by tribal leaders in the day-to-day operation of workforce development programs and services, inhibiting their efficiency and effectiveness
- **Program turfism and staff turnover:** that may arbitrarily follow turnover among tribal leaders, sapping those programs of critical expertise and institutional knowledge, inhibiting their ability to sustain and grow program success
- **Nepotism-based hiring:** instead of merit-based hiring, which discourages or prevents the most qualified individuals from obtaining available jobs
- **Disconnected leaders:** who don’t possess a working knowledge of how tribe’s workforce development programs work and how they can best support them
- **Disconnect between a tribal nation’s strategic plan and its workforce development activities:** or the lack of a strategic plan that such activities can help to advance

### FISCAL

- **Inadequate federal funding:** despite federal trust and treaty obligations to provide tribal nations with ample funding to develop their human capacity
- **Lack of sustained, discretionary funding:** with most workforce development programs heavily reliant on outside, short-term funding sources, making it difficult to design, implement, and sustain strategic workforce development solutions over time
- **Limitations on how outside funding can be spent:** which inhibits the ability to forge innovative solutions tailored to the unique workforce development needs and priorities of the service population and the tribal nation as a whole
- **Lack of awareness about available funding:** from non-tribal sources (such as federal grant programs for which tribal nations are eligible but seldom apply)
- **Excessive/irrelevant reporting requirements:** for outside grants which don’t mesh with tribal definitions of success and exact unnecessary burdens on program staff, reducing their ability to provide direct services to clients
- **Limited available funding for training, subsidized work experience placements:** that many clients sorely need

### INSTITUTIONAL

- **Poor/irregular communication:** between political leaders and programmatic leaders
- **Tribal “self-administration” of federally designed workforce development approaches:** that ignores social, cultural, political, and economic diversity of tribal nations
- **Counterproductive/rigid federal policies and regulations:** that conflict with and thwart a tribal nation’s own workforce development priorities
- **Imposition/use of state workforce development models:** which have proven ineffective in tribal communities
- **Limited tribal capacity to generate/analyze local workforce and labor market data:** for the purposes of informing strategic workforce development solutions

### PROGRAMMATIC

- **Inadequate/inaccurate federal- and state-level data:** that doesn’t accurately document local workforce and labor market conditions
- **Irregular/non-existent communication/coordination:** between workforce development-related departments, programs, and services within a tribal nation (known as the “silo effect”)
- **Overly bureaucratic intake processes:** for those seeking workforce education/training opportunities
- **Lack of qualified/experienced Native instructors:** to provide workforce education/training
- **Programs misaligned with tribal/local workforce needs:** which lessons impact of tribal resources
- **Rigid program eligibility requirements:** which impair ability to comprehensively serve tribal population’s workforce education/training needs
- **Adapting workforce development programs:** to keep pace with evolving tribal labor needs/local labor markets

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<sup>1</sup> According to DeWeaver, “Every reservation is different. Even the most common problems may be present in different ways or may be completely absent in many reservation communities” (DeWeaver, Norm. “Indian Workers and the Reservation Labor Market: Reality, Research, and a Way Forward.” Wyoming Labor Market Information, Wyoming Department of Workforce Services, August 2014, p. 3; <https://doe.state.wy.us/lmi/LAUS/LM-dynamics-in-reservation-areas-9-1-14.pdf>, accessed February 3, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> As DeWeaver explains, “With jobs scarce and many too discouraged to look for work or facing barriers that keep them out of the workforce, a significant portion of Native people are not counted in the official unemployment rate at all. They become invisible in the unemployment numbers, showing up in the data as simply ‘not in the labor force.’ The idea of ‘actively seeking work’ has been an essential element in the definition of unemployment in the federal statistical system for the past 75 years. However, it is rather nonsensical from a reservation perspective” (DeWeaver, Norm. “Tribes and the Census: Severe Disadvantage Persists Among the Native Population.” December 13, 2007, p. 3).