

# Revolution in Higher Education: Identity & Cultural Beliefs Inspire Tribal Colleges & Universities

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*Abstract: The public increasingly requires that higher education institutions demonstrate their return on investment by measuring graduation rates, cost per student, job placement rates, and income. The motivation is economic: public institutions are accountable to the investor, in this case, the taxpayer. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), on the other hand, are indebted to and inspired by the revolutionary vision of their founders: the ancestors, elders, and community members who believed that higher education rooted in tribal sovereignty, identity, systems, and beliefs would ensure the survival and prosperity of their people. TCUs are advancing Native student access and completion, developing scholars who are contributing to knowledge creation through community-based research, and promoting economic and entrepreneurial development in tribal communities.*

The tribal college movement began with prayer and ceremony, according to the late Gerald One Feather (Oglala Lakota), a founder of the tribal college movement. The founders considered the history of American Indian education, which was guided by the problematic goal of assimilation and the rejection of being Indian, and understood that their efforts required strength and guidance from the Creator, as perceived by each tribal nation. The founders of the Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) movement also understood that for Native people to survive and preserve what it means to be Indigenous, they had to assert control over the very educational systems and schools designed for assimilation. The tribal college movement was, and still is, about Native people taking control of their own lives.

In this essay, we outline three important aspects of the TCU movement. First, we offer a brief origin story of the concept of TCUs. Second, we high-

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light the importance of the ways in which TCUs bridge historical and contemporary knowledge in a cultural context. We want to be clear that TCUs exist in a particular place – on Native lands – and that is important to our story. Third, we contend that TCUs are rooted in a tribal mission engaged with cultural preservation and revitalization, which creates healthy societies and offers an outlet for contemporary expressions of both the past and the future. The acts of the founders of TCUs, and the current and future iterations of these institutions, are rooted in the powerful fact that TCUs are self-determining locations for tribal higher education; they were created by Indigenous peoples and are focused on the futures of Indigenous peoples.

On March 2, 1911, August Breuninger, a self-described mixed-blood Menominee Indian, wrote to Dr. Carlos Montezuma, a well-known Apache physician:

A University for Indians is the greatest step that we educated Indians could make in uniting our people.... It would eliminate the general conception of the people that an Indian consists of only feathers and paint. It would single us out to the Indians and the rest of the world as really progressive Indians. It would give us a better influence with the rising generation, by setting out our character in such conspicuous a manner as to be the means of being observed and imitated by them.<sup>1</sup>

Breuninger's advice offers an early form of educational decolonization by advocating tribal unity, resisting the harmful impacts of stereotypes, striving for progress, and creating role models for future generations.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note, however, that although Breuninger was bold in advocating for a "university for Indians," the proposal merely served as a precursor to an even more radical ambition: a university created by American Indians.

Other essays in this issue of *Dædalus* address the history of Indigenous education and schooling in detail. We add, however, a few points that necessarily ground any treatment of TCUs. The specific history of American Indians in higher education is one of erasure. By the early 1960s, American Indian higher education was at its lowest point. Most Indian people did not attend college; of those who did, nine out of every ten dropped out.<sup>3</sup> In 1961, only sixty-six American Indians graduated from four-year institutions, which were predominantly White.<sup>4</sup>

Among Native people, the 1960s' passion for civil rights and social justice reform manifested itself in the creation of the American Indian Movement, a national group that supported dramatic interventions in education, health, and justice. The combination of the systematic failure of Indian education, the harsh social, political, and economic conditions that characterized the 1960s, and the desire of Indian people to reclaim their cultural heritage and undo the damaging effects of colonization proved a tipping point for a revolution in Indian education.<sup>5</sup> The result was the establishment in 1968 of the first tribally controlled college in the United States: Navajo Community College, now Diné College. For the first time in American history, a post-secondary institution was created by Indians for Indians, representing hope and opportunity for the Indian people.<sup>6</sup> The tribal college movement was born.

Today, thirty-six TCUs are members of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) and serve more than twenty thousand Native and non-Native rural students, representing more than 250 tribal groups across the United States and Canada. Although each TCU is unique, they share characteristics that distinguish them from nontribal institutions. Their core mission and identity are to rebuild Indigenous nations through the teaching of

tribal histories, languages, and cultures.<sup>7</sup> They accomplish this by emphasizing cultural preservation and revitalization and incorporating, when appropriate, Western models of learning offered through mainstream disciplinary courses and degrees that are similar and transferable to mainstream four-year or graduate institutions.<sup>8</sup> TCUs focus on bridging historical and contemporary knowledge within a cultural context. Most TCUs are located on rural Indian reservations, began as two-year institutions, are less than forty years old, have relatively small student bodies (often fewer than five hundred students) that are predominantly American Indian, were chartered by one or more tribes, and have open admissions policies.

For our purposes, we reference the membership of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, an organization established in 1976 to strengthen the shared interests of TCUs. As of this writing, thirty of the thirty-six members are tribally chartered institutions established by their governing tribe under the authority of the tribe as a sovereign nation and as the provider of education for their tribal citizens. The other six members include one federally chartered college, two colleges operated by the U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Education, two tribal corporations, and one tribal/state partnership. There are several other postsecondary tribal institutions in various stages of formation that are not members of the AIHEC.

Tribal colleges provide both community employment opportunities and serve as educators of current and potential employees on reservations. In 2013–2014, TCUs employed nearly 3,400 full-time and nearly 1,700 part-time faculty and staff. Their institutions brought in more than \$485 million in revenue, with 48 percent of their total expenses in payroll. They also educated 22,797 college students, 87 percent of whom were American Indian.

And TCUs serve thousands of other community members who take advantage of the community education opportunities they provide.<sup>9</sup>

TCUs represent an assertion of sovereignty in the form of self-determination. While there are significant legal implications in the definition of tribal sovereignty and citizenship, for TCUs, sovereignty is manifested in the ways that they engage their communities in preserving and revitalizing an identity that is unique to each tribe. Among the most important qualities of identity are tribal languages; each tribal language is the means of describing relationships and building understanding of values, origin, and place. Tribal colleges build national tribal identities in addition to state and U.S. citizenship. In that context, we recognize that our “culture groups are defined by their distinctive features; language is one distinguishing feature that is important to cultural identity development and maintenance.”<sup>10</sup>

The common thread that unites all TCUs, as evidenced by their mission statements, is a commitment to the revitalization and promotion of their people’s culture, language, and tradition to strengthen one’s tribal identity.<sup>11</sup> The goal is not necessarily for Native students to “find themselves,” but rather to see and discover themselves throughout their tribal college experience. This experience is rooted in relationships between the students and each other, the students and the place of the TCU, and the students and language and culture.

Thus, on a cultural level, TCUs are about relationships. TCU founders and leaders today believe that we are first and foremost human beings. American Indian tribes commonly call themselves *The People*, united by shared beliefs, customs, relationships, and a sense of belonging. Our ancestors and elders remind us to be proud of our identities and origins, and that pride

manifests itself in our educational work. The belief that we are a People is rarely taught in formal Western education. This is part of the ongoing struggle of tribal colleges, but also part of the essential work: to be places where Native students can simply *be*. Students are educated in a place where they are known as tribal people. That is, for us, the essence of authentic community.

Given their culture-based missions, the characteristics that distinguish tribal colleges from other higher education institutions center on the ways Indigenous values and beliefs are reflected throughout the institution, particularly within the curriculum, program offerings, course content and design, and the pedagogies used by the faculty who teach within this context. The place-based nature of TCUs, combined with their goals of supporting tribal prosperity and priorities, means that they are comprehensive in their academic and vocational offerings. An individual institution might offer everything from a short-term truck driving certificate to a master's degree in education. This level of responsiveness to the needs of the community – to The People – is critical to the purpose of TCUs to provide educational access where it does not otherwise exist.

James Shanley, former president of Fort Peck Community College and a national leader in Indian education, observed the progress of tribes and TCUs in *Capturing Education*: “Saving a culture is a difficult task, but there are now more people who know (the tribe’s) history, culture, and language than thirty years ago.” Shanley goes on to describe how TCUs inspire a deep “love of learning that is both empowering and liberating....I’ve always equated education with freedom.”<sup>12</sup> TCUs are engaged in practices that weave together both freedom-making and nation-building.

Cultural identity builds nationhood. Cultural identity also develops a path of

individual achievement and leads to an improved quality of life for individuals and families. TCUs developed culturally responsive pedagogy in order to allow the “discovery of oneself . . . whether that is traditional, or whether that’s contemporary, or whether that is a combination of those things.”<sup>13</sup> TCUs recognize the diversity of their student population and their communities and respond to these needs by providing a range of supportive programs, services, and opportunities.

Tribal colleges lead with the development of language immersion programs, with a primary focus on the restoration of conversational language for all tribal citizens. Language revitalization is viewed as a political act, and TCUs often overcome significant local political disagreement to establish language immersion programs, working through tensions about which orthography to use, the use of community dialects, and the choice and qualifications of language teachers. Despite these challenges, institutions have made tremendous strides. On the Standing Rock reservation, for example, which straddles North and South Dakota, Sitting Bull College’s language program exemplifies community-based instruction combined with a preservation focus and internal and external partnerships, all focused on the same aim: the restoration of the Lakota language. Many know Standing Rock as the site of the resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline, but it is also a site of cultural resurgence in Sitting Bull College’s language efforts. These kinds of resurgences are often the result of partnerships between a TCU and middle and secondary schools. Aaniiih Nakoda College at Fort Belknap in Montana operates the White Clay Immersion School, which has graduated nearly fifty fluent or nearly fluent Aaniiih-speaking eighth graders. These efforts seek to ensure the future of the language and peoples of the region.



In a move that had far-reaching implications, TCUs established themselves as local mediators of culture. They became institutions in which tribal social norms, traditional practices, and kinship are revitalized in ways that are representative of the functional societies of our tribal past. TCUs believe that the social burdens experienced by our communities can be ameliorated by cultural restoration, which includes reviving kinship practices, using cultural values in decision-making, and employing creation and teaching stories as guides to how to live in today's society.

Education reinforces the very commitment to culture and language necessary to a healthy society. The diligence exhibited by cultural practitioners is enhanced by a TCU-educated tribal citizenry committed to maintaining traditions and knowledge and revitalizing language. Our spiritual leaders and our people pray for and believe in education and TCUs strengthen this, in part, through the work of their faculty.

For Native students, trust-building is essential to the learning process, and effective TCU faculty members will demonstrate the patience, trustworthiness, flexibility, and enthusiasm necessary to provide a caring environment for students. Faculty also foster relationships with Native students by asking about their family and their community, attending community gatherings, and by listening to their stories, challenges, and aspirations. This process takes time, space, and a high level of cultural expertise and nuance.

A veteran TCU faculty member might teach multiple generations of one family, enabling them to establish a connection and trust with the family, putting students at ease. TCU faculty are also embedded in the communities in which they live and work, and their community knowledge, cultural competency, and pedagogical skills are as essential as content knowledge for student

success. This is one critical manifestation of tribally controlled education.

Without strategies to gather culturally based knowledge, it would be difficult to achieve the academic and community impact that TCUs strive for. Because TCU faculty and staff are acutely aware of the loss of traditional knowledge as generations pass and interaction with a global population increases, TCUs are distinctly multi-generational in their approach to education, incorporating the wisdom of elders, traditional experts, heads of families, and cultural informants. These community members share their cultural and traditional knowledge, tools, and resources to inform today's society. The unique features of TCUs are also illustrated by faculty members' inclusion of diverse teaching methodologies and practices that skillfully weave the historical with the contemporary to achieve learning outcomes. In order to do so, TCU faculty must demonstrate high levels of cultural competency.

Since their inception, tribal colleges have devoted increasing resources to develop and build the capacity of Native and non-Native faculty to teach at their institutions. The American Indian College Fund, for example, implemented a five-year initiative called *Woksape Oyate* (Wisdom of the People) focused on strengthening the teaching, leadership, and scholarship capabilities of faculty across the TCU system. Through ongoing faculty development activities and initiatives, faculty members are able to use culturally relevant teaching strategies that also reinforce traditional values such as generosity, commitment to community, compassion, and humility. Faculty often come to TCUs with the desire to make a difference, and this is best accomplished when faculty become part of the people they serve.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, many tribal colleges have adopted a philosophy of "grow your own" faculty: that is, identifying individuals with existing cultural

capability and academic interest and providing them with the support to obtain degrees in order to become teachers and administrators, stabilizing and strengthening the place-based nature of TCUs.

On a more philosophical level, the implicit idea within the mission statements of TCUs is the recognition that Indigenous people are a people of place. “Indigenous people,” asserted Vine Deloria Jr., “represent a culture emergent from a place, and they actively draw on the power of that place physically and spiritually.”<sup>15</sup> This is vitally important because, in order for TCUs to fulfill their missions, they must continue to strive to develop an academic framework, curriculum, and course design that appropriately honor and reflect, to the extent possible, the cultural teachings and practices that derive from their place, which, in turn, foster a strong sense of identity and what it means to be both tribal and Indigenous.

Recognition of place within mission often requires the return to the origin or creation story of each institution. Like Tribal Nations, TCUs also have creation stories. This is a unique characteristic of tribal colleges and distinguishes them from other higher education institutions founded for different public and private purposes. The origin story of each institution honors the original intention of the founders and reinforces the manifestation of place reflected in each institution’s academic and community engagement. Retaining this individual institutional sense of purpose is critical to maintaining the vision and values of the communal nature of the tribal college movement.

In addition to supporting culturally appropriate, place-based curricula, TCUs train teachers and community educators, and collect and serve as repositories of tribal knowledge and information. Many TCU libraries serve as the tribal public library, and all house collections specific to

their tribal communities. Many TCUs have archives and museums in which both historical and contemporary memorabilia and documents are preserved.

TCUs do not just reinvigorate cultural and social prosperity in their communities, they also make significant economic contributions to their communities and the states in which they are located. A study commissioned by AIHEC found that for every dollar invested in TCUs in 2013 – 2014, the community saw a return of \$5.20 in added income and lifestyle improvement. Health, crime, and unemployment were all positively affected by education, representing a significant return on investment.<sup>16</sup> But more studies are needed. The American Indian College Fund’s return-on-investment literature review, for instance, identified limitations on the data gathered on TCUs’ impact.<sup>17</sup> While most descriptions of impact are anecdotal, this lack of data, usually explained by researchers in terms of population size, does not – and should not – diminish the invaluable ways that TCUs contribute to tribal prosperity and citizenship beyond language restoration and economic impact.

From the beginning, tribal colleges were rooted in community engagement. Many TCUs were founded on reservations where unemployment can be as high as 80 percent. The importance of TCUs to their communities “transcends their relatively small size.”<sup>18</sup> TCUs are not just community centers; they are centers of the community. The mission of TCUs to build sovereign nations through excellence in tribal higher education is reflected in all aspects of tribal college life. Tribal college facilities are used not only for educational and training purposes, but also for ceremonies and social events such as funerals, celebrations, and wellness activities. TCUs often provide the only fitness or health facilities available to their communities.

In 1994, TCUs were given land-grant status through an act of the U.S. Congress,

making them part of a special group of higher education institutions supported by the Morrill Act, which also includes state land-grant institutions (1862) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (1890). This status opened opportunities for additional research, program development, and partnerships that promote appropriate land use, water management, and services to rural populations.

In many tribal communities, TCUs provide citizens the opportunity to receive their entire education within a tribally controlled educational environment. Individuals can go to a tribally sponsored early learning center, attend a tribal pre-kindergarten program, and participate in a K – 12 education, leading to a TCU. This education path replicates the tribal socialization of children and youth that is highly valued by Indigenous people as the means to survival and prosperity. There is an important cultural and philosophical point to the fact that TCUs are located in place; it is also important to recognize that there are practical and economic return-on-investment components to being an institution located in place. Likewise, it is in *place* where TCUs translate and merge historical and contemporary aspects of knowledge.

TCUs reflect traditional teachings. Tom Sampson (Tsartlip and Nez Perce Elder), a frequent speaker on leadership and cultural values, has said that traditional teachings are about acknowledging that each person is born with special gifts; leaders are responsible for empowering and helping each person discover and use their gifts to contribute to the community and their families. He believes that this must occur in any educational context and in the rest of society. TCUs strengthen identity through self-discovery and self-expression.<sup>19</sup>

A strength of tribal colleges is their ability and capacity to offer exemplary Native studies degree programs that not only pro-

vide the tools to effectively integrate tribal knowledge into all aspects of learning, but also have unique access to elders, knowledge-holders, and sacred sites in the community. As tribal education scholar Wayne Stein has noted:

The Native studies department is that part of the indigenous college that makes it a unique institution. No other institution of higher education can or will teach the local culture and language with the love and accuracy that the locally controlled indigenous college's native studies faculty will offer, over time.<sup>20</sup>

Ready access to Indigenous knowledge and experiences allows faculty and students to work together to construct deeply enriching educational experiences. The importance of access and its influence on the tribal college experience is best articulated by Cheryl Crazy Bull:

One of the great things about being in a tribal college is that you get to see tribal scholars every day. You get to see the native language expert. You get to see the people who know where the best fishing and hunting is based on historical and cultural knowledge. You get to see where people gathered at one time and where they camped – all that information, all that knowledge still exists in our communities.<sup>21</sup>

Merging the historical with the contemporary happens frequently in the tribal college context. Several TCUs and the AIHEC participate with science programs, research, and education through the National Institute of Health's Native American Research Centers for Health, National Science Foundation Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research, and other National Science Foundation programs to engage health improvement, technology amplification, and partnerships that impact student and community health. Stone Child College on the Rocky Boy reservation in Montana facilitates a community-wide

health education program aimed at developing community health educators. Leech Lake Tribal College on the Leech Lake reservation in Minnesota grounded their health programming in traditional Anishinaabe values, recognizing sacred medicines such as tobacco, while simultaneously banning commercial tobacco from its campus.

TCUs are inextricably linked to the Civil Rights Movement, American Indian Movement, and to later social movements, such as the Stand with Standing Rock environmental and social justice movement. TCUs were established to provide the education necessary to fulfill self-determination using modern tools and traditional knowledge. Tribally controlled education has evolved into the dynamic and comprehensive education necessary to combat numerous social problems faced by Natives and the rest of society, including the challenges associated with poverty, environmental degradation, and lack of access to adequate infrastructure, health care, housing, and transportation. For example, many challenging health concerns such as heart disease and diabetes can be addressed through the use of tribal plants and medicines, combined with Native foods and fitness through Native games. Ceremonies and tribal medicines as well as language immersion can be used to alleviate posttraumatic stress disorders. Traditional child-rearing practices focused on the health and well-being of children in the context of their age, gender identity, and kinship promote healthier, happier children.

Cultural knowledge, in this context, is shared both inside and outside of the classroom by tribal scholars and researchers, local cultural teachers, Native language speakers, community leaders, advocates, and elders. Students and their extended families are the beneficiaries of this cultural knowledge, which, in turn, helps foster a positive self-identity development and future outlook for students and Native communities.

Some proponents of tribally controlled education want students to be able to address issues from a tribal viewpoint rather than only trying to advocate for tribal views through a Western lens. For example, Sharon Kinley, dean of Coast Salish Studies at Northwest Indian College (NWIC) on the Lummi reservation in Washington, has illustrated this distinction in her description of the purpose of new baccalaureate degree programs. Kinley has stressed the relationship of Lummi and other Coast Salish people to the sea. The sea is the place from which her people emerged; it is the place from which her people defined their homelands. It represents their economy, describes their social system, and serves as the source of food and other resources. To approach decision-making about the water without understanding the relationship of the people to the sea is to approach decision-making from a nontribal perspective. The goal of the Native studies leadership and Native environmental science degrees at NWIC is to teach students to approach decision-making through self-determination as tribal citizens.

TCUs recognize that inherent connections between the past and present are the strength of tribally based higher education. TCUs also recognize that education, in place, allows students an opportunity to see the context of learning as both an academic and a cultural enterprise. Students grow through the opportunity to remain embedded in their homelands and community and to receive access to an institution of higher education at the same time.

TCU founders were focused on access to higher education. As James Shanley has observed, the early TCUs modeled themselves after mainstream community colleges, which were designed to support local control and visibility and to promote access to education for all citizens, particularly for veterans returning from World War II.<sup>22</sup>



The similarities between TCUs and mainstream community colleges diverge sharply from there, however. Tribal colleges were not created to be mainstream institutions with Western educational missions. “Tribal colleges and universities,” according to Cheryl Crazy Bull, “have emerged from the sacred to do the necessary, present-day work of our ancestors. They teach our languages, socialize our children and support their families, protect and manage our resources and assets, and preserve our identities and our ways of living for future generations.”<sup>23</sup> Access to education is more than obtaining skills to earn a credential. It is about access to tribal knowledge, community, role identification, purpose, kinship, family, and relationships. Because of TCUs, Native students have access to a source of strength and support in their own community and the resources necessary to be successful in college.

The vision of the TCU movement is fulfilled through this continuous, focused commitment to identity and place. The revolution that the tribal colleges manifest while rooted in the founders’ vision is one that is dynamic in its responsiveness to the evolution of TCUs as higher education institutions and as community-based institutions. TCUs demonstrate adaptability and creativity in their development of resources and programs as they respond to changing community priorities and tribal needs. The desire for tribal citizens to be educated in order to maintain cultural integrity and to facilitate self-determination is still the focus of the TCU movement.

Prayers and ceremonies both informed TCU visionaries and founders and served as their source of strength and power. Their sense of purpose – access to higher education *and* people restored to wellness and prosperity – motivates the founding of TCUs as well as their continued existence despite numerous financial and

social challenges. Symbolic representations of this sense of purpose permeate the environment of TCUs, ranging from course content to facility design. Most important, however, these representations occur in the actions of students, staff, and TCU leadership; they act as good relatives to each other and to the rest of creation; they keep the teachings of their ancestors alive; and they focus on being a people as defined by their own values and stories.

As revolutionaries, the founders of tribal higher education institutions committed to remaining unchanged as Indigenous, to resisting assimilation, and to serve as the pillars of modern tribal Indigenous societies. Their vision of transformation and wellness rooted in traditional educational practices, spirituality, and relationship remains at the heart of the tribal college movement.

The return on investment desired by TCU founders is being fulfilled. They wanted tribal people to be educated beyond survival. The founders wanted their people to prosper as Indigenous people. This prosperity rooted in tribal sovereignty, identity, the development of tribally controlled education systems, and the use of our values and beliefs to advance our goals is being accomplished.

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