

SEVEN GENERATIONS: A Framework for Ensuring Tribal College and University Sustainability



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In 1968, Navajo Community College (now Diné College) became the first tribally chartered, post-secondary institution and launched the tribal college movement. Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) were created (1) to provide tribal citizens with a culturally relevant education that preserves and perpetuates tribal culture and language, and (2) to meet the workforce needs of Tribal Nations. Today there are 35 accredited TCUs that continue to serve this dual mission, but they face challenges to their long-term sustainability and little research has been conducted in this area. The purpose of this study was to develop a preliminary framework that identifies and describes the key components of TCU sustainability. The framework was informed by a literature review, a review of TCU strategic plans, and interviews with leaders, board members, and faculty and staff members from five TCUs located in Arizona, New Mexico, and North Dakota. The nine-point framework that emerged can help tribal colleges to focus their time and resources so they can flourish and serve their students and communities for generations to come.



Seven Generations: A Framework for Ensuring Tribal College and University Sustainability

Why Focus on Tribal College and University (TCU) Sustainability?

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) play a critical role in the education of American Indian and Alaska Native students and in the preservation of tribal cultures and languages. The formation of Navajo Community College (now Diné College) in 1968 marked the beginning of tribal oversight of higher education. Currently, there are 35 accredited and several nonaccredited TCUs across the United States.

Although nearly all TCUs have continued to operate since their formation, at least three have closed their doors and many face continual financial, staffing and other challenges. Given the importance of TCUs to students, families, and tribal communities, it is surprising how little we know about what contributes to TCU sustainability. At predominantly white universities, the discussion of sustainability has evolved to focus on environmental stewardship. At TCUs, however, sustainability still means survivability.

This research brief presents a preliminary framework for understanding TCU sustainability so that tribal colleges can direct time and resources toward those efforts that will ensure their success for generations to come.

The framework was developed from three sources:

1. A literature review to uncover the factors that led to the successful formation and growth of TCUs and to the closure of three TCUs.
2. A review of TCU mission and vision statements and strategic plans.
3. Interviews with leaders, faculty, and staff from five TCUs.

The framework that emerged can serve as a roadmap for TCU leaders, faculty and staff, governing boards, and tribal communities to strengthen their institutions so they can serve their missions for seven generations to come. The framework can also guide foundations, federal and state governments, and Native-serving organizations as they invest in and support TCUs.

This brief was written by Heidi Normandin, Faculty Development Program Officer at the American Indian College Fund. It was based on the following report:

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Why Do TCUs Exist?

TCUs were created to meet the education needs of tribal members in a culturally sustaining way, which was (and is) the opposite of what most tribal students experienced (and continue to experience) at mainstream postsecondary institutions. Tribal communities wanted to create a culturally appropriate postsecondary educational system that (a) produced students with the skills and knowledge to contribute to the tribal economy, and (b) helped preserve and perpetuate tribal culture, values, and language. TCUs still serve this dual mission today.

TCU Successes and Challenges – A Look Back

Much of the research literature on TCUs focuses on their history, student success, and leadership. This research often includes descriptions of institutional successes and challenges, especially related to their formation and structure. As the first step in our study, we reviewed this varied literature to identify the factors contributing to the successful development and growth of TCUs – factors that we presume are important to their long-term sustainability.

Arviso (2020) discussed the challenges Diné College (formerly Navajo Community College) had to overcome to build the first tribally controlled college. Arviso concluded it is critical that tribal colleges have the support of their tribal council and tribal communities. TCUs also need to overcome challenges related to geographic location, infrastructure, accreditation, information technology, libraries, qualified staff and, most importantly, funding.

Similarly, in a case study of one TCU, Oltrogge (2010) found challenges to the institution's development and in three interrelated areas: finance, governance and control, and accreditation.

TCUs also experience tensions as they strive for success. Fox et. al (2005) suggest TCUs must balance the tensions between preserving tribal culture and promoting tribal economic development, and between Native and non-Native staff. They also noted additional institutional challenges such as lack of physical facilities, adequate funding (including federal allocations), and public support of minority issues, as well as the need to meet accreditation requirements.

Conversely, what helps TCUs thrive? Longie (2005) describes how two TCUs thrived, citing factors such as the perceived need for the institution, effective leaders who are tribal members, community support, and an ability to overcome obstacles such as poor facilities and funding.

Taken together, the literature on TCU formation and growth contributes to our TCU sustainability framework. We conclude the following seven factors are important to consider:

- 1. Tribal community desire** for an educational system that meets the needs of tribal government, the local economy, and the broader tribal community.
- 2. An independent and effective governing board and administration.**
- 3. Effective leadership**, ideally held by people who represent the tribal community and understand the cultural context.
- 4. Maintaining accreditation**, which is critical for securing funding. This depends on student assessment and a student body that is at least 50% American Indian and Alaska Native students.
- 5. Securing funding** and establishing financial reporting systems.
- 6. Infrastructure** in the form of adequate buildings, classrooms, and up-to-date technologies.
- 7. Qualified faculty and staff.**



Aaniiih
Nakoda
College

TCU Missions, Visions, and Strategic Plans – A Review of TCU Priorities Today

The literature review provides insights about the challenges and successes faced by TCUs as they develop and grow. We next ask, What are TCUs doing today to ensure their short- and long-term sustainability?

To answer this question, we conducted a review of TCU mission and vision statements and strategic plans to understand how TCUs are thinking about their present and future. These documents identify areas tribal colleges believe are important to their success and strategies they will use to achieve their vision.

TCU Mission Statements

Why do tribal colleges exist? What is their mission or purpose? TCU mission statements reveal the unique role of tribal colleges and important considerations for their sustainability.

TCUs were created for two primary reasons: (1) to produce students with skills and knowledge to contribute to the tribal economy, and (2) to help preserve and perpetuate tribal culture, values, and language through a tribally focused curricula and educational system.

Several researchers have examined TCU mission statements in depth. As shown in Figure 1, Honena (2011) and Riding In (2010) each found five themes which indicate TCUs are staying true to their founding purposes. Honena's review looked at mission statements as indicators of what tribal needs are and how it shapes the TCU's curricula.

Riding In's review used an Indigenous lens to illustrate how tribally controlled education differs from mainstream postsecondary education. Our own review (Sanders, 2022) of 35 TCU mission statements found three themes consistent with Honena's and Riding In's themes.

In sum, we found the purpose of TCUs is to provide access to high-quality academic programs in or near tribal communities, support individual student learning and contribute to community improvement, while utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy and a postsecondary structure grounded in local tribal cultures and worldviews.

TCU Vision Statements

The vision statement spells out what the TCU wants to become and the future it wants to create for its students and community.

Our review of 35 TCU vision statements found TCUs want to become institutions that:

- are known for their academic excellence,
- promote the continuation of tribal languages, worldviews, and cultures,
- have academic programs reflecting Indigenous values and approaches,
- are institutions where students can become educated, empowered, and equipped to achieve their goals for the betterment of their Tribal Nations, and
- contribute positively to their Tribal Nations—through Native Nation-building and support of self-determination and tribal sovereignty—and to their surrounding areas.

TCU Strategic Plans

A strategic plan is the road map for how an institution will carry out its mission (purpose) to reach its future destination (vision). We analyzed the initiatives in 22 TCU strategic plans to understand where TCUs are focusing their efforts over the next several years.

We identified 18 priority areas across TCU strategic plans. The top three priority areas were student success, institutional improvement, and academic program development. Other important themes included financial stability, culture and language, and research. The themes of tribal sovereignty and leadership were mentioned, although much less frequently.

Are TCU Missions, Visions, and Strategic Plans Aligned?

We explored the level of alignment between the missions, visions, and strategic plans across TCUs. Strong alignment would suggest TCUs are connecting their vision of the future with their mission and strategic plan.

As shown in Figure 1, we found great alignment and consistency among them. The columns on the left summarize the themes found in TCU mission statements, as identified by three researchers. The researchers found general agreement with each other, with the exception of “promote leadership,” which was identified by only one researcher.

The middle column summarizes the 18 themes identified in our analysis of strategic plan initiatives. The right column summarizes five themes that emerged from our review of TCU vision statements.

While there were some inconsistencies, which is to be expected when analyzing 35 institutions, we were able to identify common themes we believe are important for the development of a TCU sustainability framework.



Navajo Technical University

FIGURE 1: Alignment Across TCU Mission Statements, Strategic Plan Initiatives, and Vision Statements

TCU Mission Statements			TCU Strategic Plan Initiatives	TCU Vision Statements
Honena (2010)	Riding In (2011)	Sanders (2022)		
Provide quality education programs	Academic integrity Pedagogy	Access to quality education programs	Technology integration and use Academic program development Institutional improvement Infrastructure Financial stability Staff and faculty Land grant status Research	Offer high-quality, culturally based academic programs Institutions become centers of lifelong learning and exemplary higher education institutions for their tribes
Promote culture and language	Cultural initiatives	Culture and language revitalization through education	Culture and language instruction Teaching and instruction Culture and language	Ensure viability and sustainability of culture and language, integrate Native worldviews, provide learning embedded in culture
Support individualized learning	Pedagogy	Improve students	Student success Ethics, culture, and identity Student supports	Student empowerment and preparation
Support community needs	Economic initiatives Tribal community	Improve communities	Community engagement Partnerships Sovereignty	Desired institutional impact on community, tribe, and region
Promote leadership			Leadership	

The horizontal color bands identify areas of consistency across TCU missions, visions, and strategic plans.

The blue band at the top relates to themes of **providing quality postsecondary education**.

The gold band relates to themes of **tribal culture, values, and language**.

The green band in the middle relates to **student success-focused themes**.

The orange band relates to **engagement with and service to the tribal community**.

The white band relates to **leadership**.

In Their Words – Interviews with TCU Leaders, Faculty and Staff

As the third step in constructing our sustainability framework, we held conversations with 31 TCU leaders, faculty and staff members, and board members from five TCUs: Diné College (DC), Navajo Technical University (NTU), Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College (NHSC), Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC), and United Tribes Technical College (UTTC). The TCUs represented one urban and four rural communities. One offered STEM, two were chartered by the same tribal nation but operated in different states, and one was chartered by five tribal nations.

We held one-hour, semi-structured, virtual interviews between May and October 2021. Our research questions were:

- What does institutional sustainability mean to you?
- What are the biggest challenges to your institution’s sustainability?
- What does your institution look like in 10 years?

What Does Institutional Sustainability Mean to You?

Tribal college sustainability is viewed as important yet there is no agreed-upon definition or conceptualization. Despite this, we found eight themes in our analysis of responses to this question. Funding (which was mentioned by at least one person from all five institutions) as well as community and students (both mentioned by people from 4 institutions) were most important. Other themes were programming, faculty, renewable energy, services, and the strategic plan.

One participant shared a broad definition of sustainability.



It’s a pretty deep question, I guess it (TCU sustainability) could mean a lot of things. I tend to think from a fiscal standpoint, you need resources and financial sustainability to be able to operate and achieve your goals. If you don’t have that, you could be doing really well with the rest of the stuff, but it’s going to be hard to function. I think that’s the building block and then the other things that ultimately increase your sustainability, come second.”

Overall, interview participants centered TCU sustainability on two main components: fiscal stability and being highly adaptable and responsive so they meet the changing needs of students and the tribal community. Participants identified other important areas including maintaining an adequate and well-trained faculty and staff, and being an institution that can develop in-demand and accredited programs.





Institute of American Indian Arts

What are the Biggest Challenges to Your Institution's Sustainability?

Twenty-nine percent of interview participants stated that staffing issues threaten institutional sustainability, which was unexpected. In fact, at least one participant from all five TCUs mentioned this concern. After staffing, the biggest challenge was the institution's ability to stay relevant to the community and students, which requires the TCU to understand and adapt to their needs.

Participants identified several challenges to sustainability and ways to overcome these challenges:

- Recruit and hire **faculty and staff** who can juggle multiple roles. This is difficult because the applicant pool is small in their rural areas or the TCU can't offer competitive salaries. Another challenge is to minimize the impact on the institution when one person leaves their position.
- Offer relevant, in-demand programs and meet the changing needs of **students**. Students may be less interested in culture and language than the previous generation and may have moved to urban areas, away from rural TCUs.
- **Leaders** should openly communicate with staff and faculty, create a larger vision for the institution, be present and on campus, and follow institutional policies.
- Secure sufficient **funding** in general and overcome challenges specific to **grant funding**, which include finding the right person to oversee the project and finding a sustainable way to keep the person on staff after the grant ends.

One participant mentioned another challenge related to the changing demographics of the student body.



... when the college first opened...the student demographic was all over the place in terms of, older students, younger students. Well, now I think if you look at our average student age [it] has really been coming down, down, down, because I think the community, we've caught up. ... the people who wanted two-year degrees got them... So, our students are...coming out of high school. ... **we have to look at, where is the demand**, where is the desire for degrees, and where's that coming from, and how's that going to be changing, now and in the future?"

What Does Your Institution Look Like in 10 Years?

Participants were generally optimistic about the future of their TCU, but this optimism was tempered by practical considerations, especially about recruiting a sufficient number of students. There were also concerns about the most effective modality to deliver programs (e.g., fully online, hybrid) to attract and retain students.

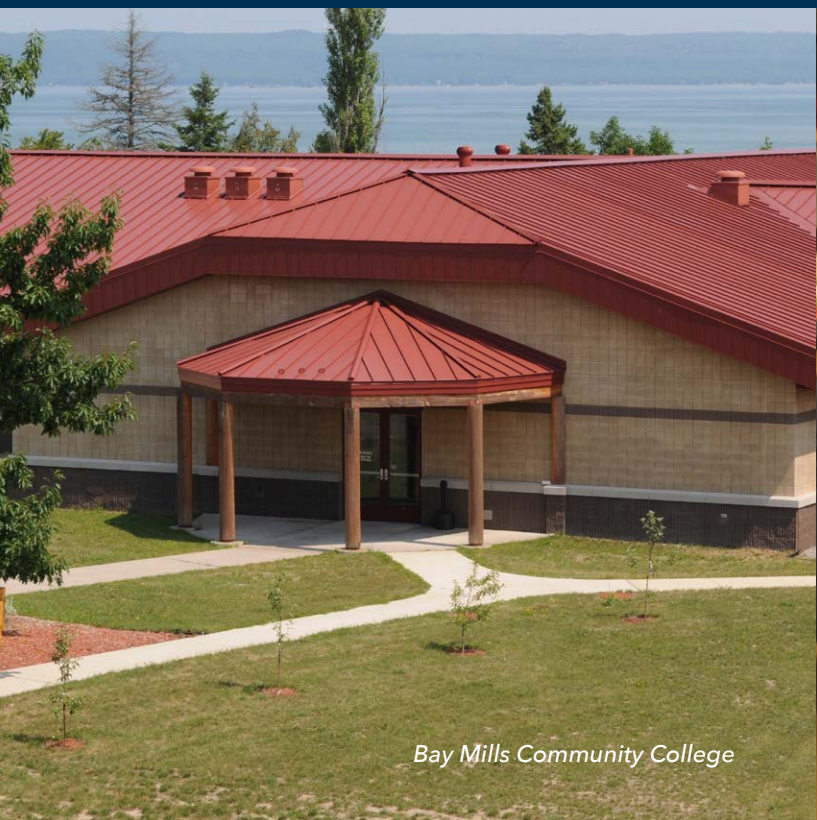
However, this optimism was often framed in terms of expansion—of the physical and technological infrastructure of the institution, of recruitment into a larger regional and national geographical area, and of programs. The latter was expressed as expansion of existing programs, as well expanding degree offerings, such as from two-year to four-year programs or adding a graduate degree.



Red Lake
Nation College

29%

of interview participants stated
that staffing issues threaten
institutional sustainability.



Bay Mills Community College



TCU leaders, faculty, and staff mentioned several other ideas for how they envision the future of their institution. They want their tribal college to:

- Be recognized for their intellectual capacity and expertise in conducting research, grant writing, and program evaluation. This could lead to collaborations with Tribal Nations in the areas of economic planning, strategic planning, tribal self-determination, and nation-building.
- Be seen as a generator of resources, such as through entrepreneurial partnerships with the Tribal Nation, local enterprises, and state institutions. Furthermore, faculty and students who conduct research can bring in grant funds to the college.
- Be recognized around the world as innovators and experts in Indigenous education.
- Diversify their resources and increase their fundraising efforts, such as through establishing resource development departments.
- Modernize their technological infrastructure.
- Provide housing for students and faculty.

Do the Interview Responses Align with the Literature and TCU Missions, Visions, and Strategic Plans?

In the literature review we found seven factors that played a role in the successful establishment of TCUs. They are:

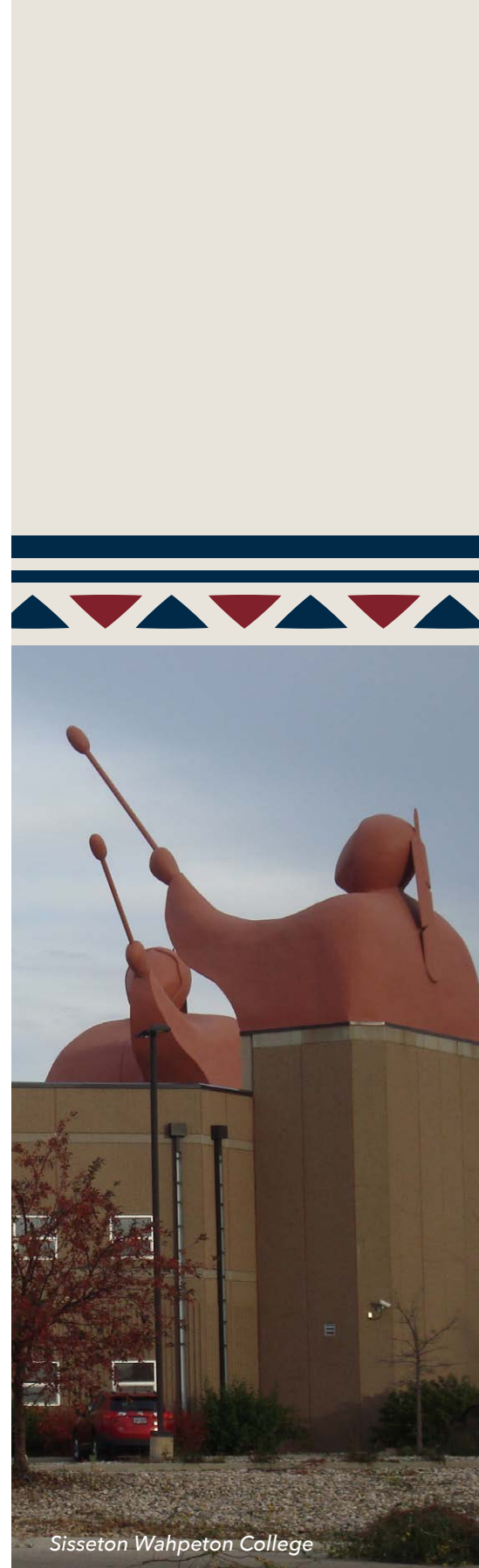
(1) community push for a tribal education system, (2) development of an independent and effective governing board and administration, (3) effective leadership, (4) accreditation, (5) securing funding and establishing financial reporting systems, (6) infrastructure, and (7) hiring and retaining qualified faculty and staff.

We found five themes in our analysis of TCU missions, visions, and strategic plans: (1) provide quality education programs, (2) promote culture and language, (3) support individualized learning, (4) respond to and support community needs, and (5) promote leadership.

Overall, the interview responses aligned well with these themes.

On the first question about the definition of sustainability and the third question about the future, participants mentioned each of the above themes except two: leadership and governing board/administration.

On the second question about challenges to their sustainability, participants mentioned each of the above themes except three: leadership, governing board/administration, and infrastructure.



Sisseton Wahpeton College

A TCU Sustainability Framework

We propose that TCU sustainability—that is, their long-term survival and success—consists of the following components:

- 1 Adequate funding** - This encompasses acquisition of funding (e.g., federal, state, and tribal), the development of resources (e.g., resource development, foundations, nonprofits), and the responsible stewardship of operating funds and grant funding.
- 2 Effective leadership** - This is characterized by visionary leaders who are present, respectful to cultural protocols, from the community, bound by institutional policy, and capable of working collaboratively with tribal communities.
- 3 Responsive academic programs** - The TCU must offer relevant and adaptable accredited programs that are shaped by community and student needs.
- 4 Expanded infrastructure** - Tribal colleges should continually develop their physical infrastructure (e.g., buildings, residence halls, faculty housing), as well as their technological infrastructure so they can expand their programs to larger geographical areas.
- 5 Qualified faculty and staff** - This can be achieved when institutions promote the benefits of their location (e.g., within or near tribal lands/communities) and work through the challenges of their location, especially when recruiting, hiring, and retaining faculty and staff.
- 6 Supportive Tribal Nations** - Tribal Nations are encouraged to collaborate with and take advantage of their TCU's expertise (e.g., economic development, Tribal Nation-building, innovation). Tribal Nations and tribal colleges should work together to develop academic programs that meet community and economic needs.
- 7 Sufficient student body** - This can be achieved by expanding outreach and recruitment beyond the usual geographic boundaries and using new methods such as social media. The TCU must also develop in-demand programs, and successfully enroll, retain, and graduate students.
- 8 Adherence to guiding principles** - TCU sustainability is more likely when there is alignment between its mission, vision, and strategic plan.
- 9 Supportive governing board** - TCUs are best served by a board that has independence from the Tribal Nation and with whom they have a mutually trusting relationship.

All of these components influence each other in an ecosystem that exhibits qualities of reciprocity, relevance, and relationships.

People clearly play an important role in TCU sustainability, as indicated by the importance of students, leaders, faculty, staff, and governing board. It should be noted that leaders and the governing board serve as liaisons between the campus (internal) and community (external). The Tribal Nation and local community (both external) provide financial support, guidance on embedding tribal culture and language, and guidance about academic programs that meet the community's needs.

TCU sustainability is further influenced by accrediting and regulatory bodies that shape academic programs. Finally, national organizations such as the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, National Indian Education Association, and American Indian College Fund also influence and support TCUs in achieving sustainability through funding and other supports.

Conclusion

The tribal college movement emerged during the civil rights movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, when Tribal Nations were asserting their sovereignty to provide a quality, culturally based higher education for their citizens. Tribal Nations called on TCUs to support economic development by developing a workforce to fill tribal and federal jobs. TCUs have largely succeeded at this mission and are offering further support to their Tribal Nations beyond their founding purpose.

TCUs have a larger vision for their students, communities, and themselves. This was shared in the interviews and in their strategic plans and vision statements. In many ways, tribal colleges have already created the future of postsecondary education. They offer personalized education that is located where students live, culturally sustaining, at low cost, and focused on in-demand degrees and credentials.

Yet this reality comes with challenges for TCUs because of their rural locations, faculty and staff recruitment difficulties, a changing student body, and insufficient infrastructure.

The framework that emerged from this project can help TCUs leaders, faculty and staff members, governing boards, and tribal communities to invest time and resources in the areas that matter most to their institution's sustainability. The framework also can guide the investment of resources by foundations, governments, and Native-serving organizations.

We hope this preliminary framework helps TCUs to not only survive, but flourish for generations to come.

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