Assuring the Quality of Academic Programs at Tribal Colleges and Universities

AMERICAN INDIAN
COLLEGE FUND
EDUCATION IS THE ANSWER

As institutions of higher education, tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) share many of the same educational quality assurance practices as their peers, such as pursuing accreditations, evaluating the need for new academic programs, and regularly reviewing current academic programs. Unique to TCUs, they have a dual mission to provide academic programs that incorporate tribal culture and language and to respond to the needs of the communities that chartered them. Little research has been done to understand quality assurance practices in the TCU setting. This study sought to fill the gap through interviews with leaders and faculty and staff members at five TCUs—three in North Dakota and two serving the Navajo Nation. There were strong similarities across TCUs. First, all five TCUs had a similar formal, four-step process to develop new academic programs. Second, all TCUs engaged in degree program development to add new degree levels and add options at an existing degree level. Third, all TCUs conducted regular reviews of their academic programs using a wide range of criteria, including graduation rates, job placements, student interest, and community needs. Fourth, contextual factors such as their rural locations, institutional identities, and integration of tribal culture and language influenced the design and selection of academic programs at the TCUs.

Assuring the Quality of Academic Programs at Tribal Colleges and Universities

From community colleges to doctoral degree-granting universities, higher education institutions exist to provide academic programs that lead to certificates and degrees. Students, employers, and communities want assurance that these academic programs meet standards for quality. Quality is typically defined as programs that have clear learning outcomes and help students get meaningful jobs, seamlessly transfer to other institutions, and lead personally satisfying lives (Humphreys and Gaston, 2019).

Higher education institutions have developed quality assurance processes to evaluate potential new programs and current programs. Much of this work is designed to gain accreditation from third-party, nongovernmental organizations (e.g., Higher Learning Commission) that provide formal assurance the institution or specific programs have met a minimum level of quality.

Challenges to Assessing Academic Program Quality at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)

In pursuing accreditation as visible way to assure students of a quality education, TCUs are similar to mainstream college and universities. All five TCUs in this study were accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Accreditation is required for membership in the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), a national organization that advocates for TCUs at the federal level. Currently, 35 TCUs are AIHEC members. Accreditation is more than a marker of a quality education, it is also a gateway to critical federal funding for students, including Pell Grants for low-income undergraduates.

In other ways, TCUs are markedly different from mainstream institutions. One of the primary differences lies in their mission to not only educate American Indian and Alaska Native students but also to preserve and perpetuate tribal cultures and languages (American Indian College Fund, 2023a). This dual mission is born out of the founding rationale for TCUs. Tribal colleges and universities were formed as acts of self-determination in higher education and to support Tribal Nation-building.

Efforts by a TCU to adhere to its community purpose can create tension and cultural incongruity between TCUs and accrediting bodies. For example, traditional definitions of quality might lead accrediting bodies to heavily weigh job placements or one-time graduate rates. While these outcomes are priorities for TCUs, they also must respond to the training and education needs expressed by their tribal councils.

What Does the Research Say About Quality Assurance Practices at TCUs?

One way TCUs assure the quality of their academic programs is through accreditation. What else is known about how they evaluate and improve their academic offerings?

Little research has been conducted on quality assurance practices at TCUs. Previous research has focused on the larger contextual factors that affect the creation and direction of TCU academic programs. One significant contextual factor is that TCUs were formed to respond to tribal and community needs, as discussed above, and their programs are tied to meeting those needs. Another factor is that in their early years, many TCUs operated under the umbrella of nearby accredited universities and taught their courses, which may have shaped their internal processes for developing academic programs. Their focus on their communities may also reframe what quality education means. Quality may mean TCUs are providing a useful service to their tribal communities. Gaining community feedback is an important factor in TCU quality assurance processes.

Another contextual factor is that TCUs are constantly developing new academic programs at higher levels (e.g., bachelors, masters) in an effort to grow the college's offerings. Lastly, private and public grants typically require TCUs to evaluate programs at regular intervals (e.g., every five years) for specific outcomes (e.g., job placement rates, course drop rates).

While there is some research on quality assurance practices for academic program development, there is an absence of information about the criteria and processes TCUs use to create and review academic programs.

The Current Study: Interviews with TCU Leaders and Faculty and Staff Members from Five TCUs

This study sought to fill the gap in research on quality assurance at TCUs. Interviews were conducted with 31 leaders and faculty and staff members at five TCUs: Diné College, Navajo Technical University, Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College, Turtle Mountain Community College, and United Tribes Technical College. The interviews were conducted between May and October of 2021 as part of a larger study on tribal college institutional sustainability. The interviews were transcribed and coded to develop major themes and subthemes.

TCU personnel did not use the terms postsecondary credentialing or quality assurance practices. Instead, their responses centered on academic program development, program review, funding sources, and program elimination. We believe *academic program development* more accurately reflects their discussion of postsecondary credentialing and quality assurance practices.
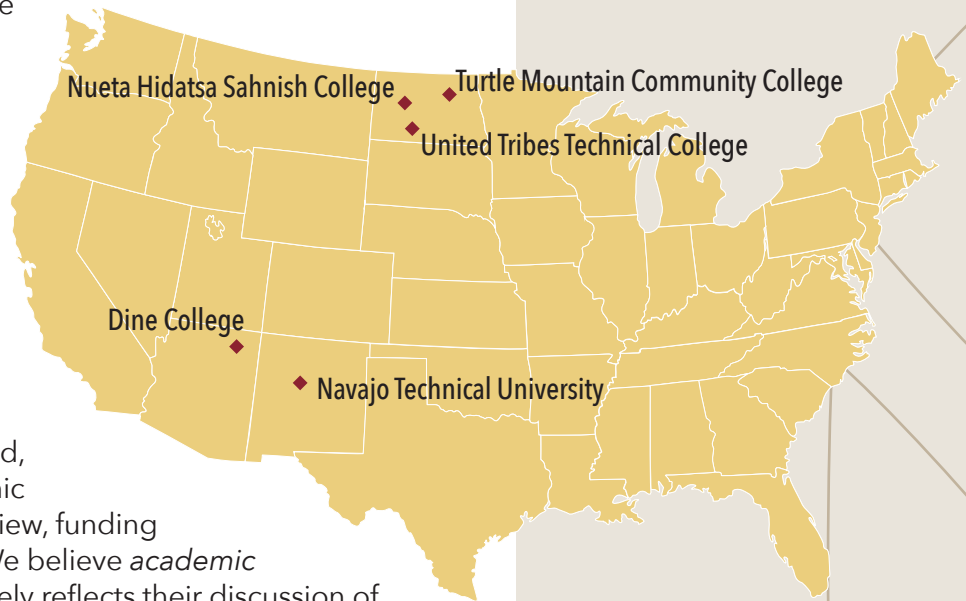
We focused the analysis on the following questions:

1. By what process do tribal colleges and universities develop academic programs? What criteria do they use to approve them?

2. By what process do tribal colleges and universities evaluate their existing academic programs and what criteria do they use to eliminate programs?

3. What contextual factors make these processes similar and different across the five tribal colleges in this study?

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the interviews. First, TCUs use a similar four-step process to develop academic programs. Second, all five institutions are working to expand the number of programs within a current degree level and to add new degree levels. Third, TCUs use a similar process to evaluate and assess the quality of current academic programs. Finally, TCUs face a unique set of contextual factors that influences the creation and review of their academic programs.

FINDING #1:
TCUs use a similar process to develop new academic programs.

Within each TCU and across the five TCUs, there was a surprising level consistency in the process to develop new academic programs. There were four steps in the process.

1 **Planning** – In this phase, individuals (often faculty members) or committees generate an idea for a new program and must gather evidence the program is needed. Program ideas may come from faculty members' and leaders' interests, training requests from tribal councils, local job market analyses, community listening sessions and surveys, and national labor trends. Many interviewees commented that community input was strongest and most visible in this phase. The final stage of the planning process is to write an application or proposal for the program justifying the need for the program.

> At one TCU, faculty visit tribal communities to get ideas and gain support for proposed programs. The individual leading the proposal must demonstrate how the Tribal Nation's educational philosophy will be incorporated into the curriculum.
>
> At another TCU, leaders, faculty, and staff get ideas from a community survey and community feedback. Promising ideas are assigned to a faculty member who develops the program and outlines the need for the program. Funding usually needs to be secured during the proposal development process.

2 **Internal review** – At this stage, internal committees and/or councils review program proposals. In general, faculty give their application or proposal to their department chair, who then presents the proposal to a committee (e.g., curriculum committee). If approved, the proposal is sent to an administrative committee comprising a wide range of leaders, faculty members, and staff members who analyze its potential costs, redundancy with existing programs, utility, and mission fit. Finally, the program is put to a vote by the board of directors or board of regents. At any time during this phase, the application or proposal may be sent to an earlier committee or back to the first phase for more planning and data gathering.

> At one TCU, the group or department proposing a new program will meet with the vice president of academic affairs and executive committee. The program is then submitted to a curriculum committee which checks for overlap with other courses in the state university system and determines if the program fills a gap at the college. Finally, an institutional effectiveness committee evaluates the program before it moves to the next phase.

3 **External review** – Once the program has been approved internally, it is submitted to an accrediting body. One of the main accreditation bodies is the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). According to participants in this study, the HLC review was typically most intensive for a first-time academic program or degree level, such as a tribal college's first bachelor's degree. Requests for subsequent degree programs are typically easier and simpler. Accreditation can also come from professional organizations that regulate the quality of specific trades and professions (often called programmatic accreditation). For example, engineering programs are accredited by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology.

> At one TCU, the administrative committee is composed of people familiar with HLC requirements and the accreditation process. At some tribal colleges, a staff member is designated as the HLC liaison to facilitate proposals.

4 **Program implementation** – Newly approved and accredited courses and degree programs are added to the course catalog, marketed to students, taught by faculty, and then added to a program review cycle. Many TCUs aim to get academic programs accredited in the spring so they can be launched in the fall semester.

In sum, the five TCUs follow a similar process to develop new academic courses and programs. This similarity is likely due to three reasons. First, TCU leaders value data-driven decisions and want to ensure new programs do not duplicate other programs and will meet community and labor market needs. Second, TCUs have decades of experience working with and being evaluated by HLC. TCU personnel indicated that frequent communication with HLC and adhering to its accrediting process influenced their internal program development procedures. Third, long-standing practices at other higher education institutions in the United States have served as models for program development at TCUs.

FINDING #2
TCUs engage in vertical and horizontal program development.

Vertical development refers to the creation of higher program levels (e.g., the first bachelor's degree). This expansion is important to students, TCUs, and communities. Students benefit because they can pursue further education without leaving their communities. Vertical program development benefits the TCU by serving more students for a longer time and benefits the community by keeping students at home and preparing them for specialized tribal and community jobs.

Horizontal program development involves the creation of academic programs at an existing academic program level (e.g., a third associate degree). For example, a TCU might add another certificate program to its health professions department in response to the community's workforce needs. Horizontal program development increases opportunities for students to enter different kinds of employment and transfer to other postsecondary institutions.

Both vertical and horizontal program development benefit students by creating stackable degrees. TCU staff noted that vertical development creates a pathway for deeper specialization and expanded job opportunities in a field (e.g., education) as students move from an associate degree to a bachelor's and possibly a master's degree. Horizontal program development helps students collect certificates or associate degrees that provide skills for a variety of positions within a sector (e.g., construction, health).

FINDING #3
TCUs use a similar process to review existing programs.

All TCUs regularly evaluate the quality of their academic programs to ensure they are fulfilling their missions and meeting the requirements of external organizations such as the HLC. Given the number of vocational, certificate, and degree programs at TCUs, and their small staffing levels, program review can be an intensive undertaking. TCUs reviewed their programs at regular intervals (e.g., reviewing career and technical programs every two years).

There were strong similarities across the five TCUs' program review processes. These similarities likely arose from their years of experience in meeting the requirements for accreditation. As a first step, TCUs gather a wide range of information, often relying on committees and institutional research departments to do this work. The five TCUs in this study collect the following data and information: labor market trends, student data (e.g., enrollment, persistence, retention, and graduation rates; test scores), budgets, input from the community and tribe, and job placement information. The TCUs also gather data about the program's impact on the community and how well the program met the cultural aspect of their missions.

> At one TCU, one criterion to review a program is the extent to which it incorporates the Tribal Nation's educational philosophy.
>
> Another TCU uses the academic program review process as a way to assess the community and cultural relevancy of their programs.

Based on the data and information, review committees make a decision to continue, monitor, or eliminate the program.

Several challenges in program review were noted by interviewees. It can be challenging for the committee to review the available data and arrive at a decision. Difficulties arose when they found conflicting data, they had to assign a weight to each metric, or committee members interpreted the meaning of the data differently.

Even seemingly clear indicators, such as low enrollment numbers, do not mean a program will be eliminated. The review committee may keep the program because of more important factors, such how the program serves the institution's mission. Two TCUs discussed "archiving" rather than eliminating programs, usually certifications or vocational programs, that could be brought back if needed. Similarly, TCUs may archive a program with high enrollment numbers if graduates were saturating the local labor market and would need to move to find a job.

Overall, leaders, faculty, and staff spoke positively about what they gained from the review process and how the quality of their programs was improved.

> An academic program at one TCU uses the program review process to document its positive outcomes.
>
> At another TCU, the review process gives faculty the opportunity to share their perspective on academic programs.
>
> A third TCU uses the review process to identify areas in which program staff could use additional resources and to solve program-related problems.

FINDING #4
Contextual factors specific to TCUs influence the development and review of academic programs.

At least four additional factors influence the design and review of TCU academic programs: geography, college identity, incorporation of tribal culture and language, and the state educational ecosystem.

Most TCUs serve rural reservations and students must travel long distances to attend classes. To better serve students, TCUs have built instructional sites and satellite campuses across the reservation, offered online programs, and offered courses at times and days that take into account students' travel times and family caretaking duties.

Program development is also affected by institutional identity. Some TCUs may focus on specific programs, such as science and technology, which makes it easier to make decisions about new programs. If two or more TCUs are located in the same geographic area, they tend to offer distinct academic programs aligned with their institutional identity.

As part of their dual mission, all TCUs incorporate tribal culture and language into their curriculum and programs. One criterion for program review is how well this is accomplished. For example, at a programmatic level, all TCUs offer American Indian studies and tribal language programs. Some TCUs require review committees for new programs to verify that tribal culture and education philosophy will be incorporated. This requires program developers to clearly show in their application how tribal culture will be embedded.

Lastly, the larger state educational ecosystem influences how academic programs are created. A number of TCU students transfer to state universities, thus TCUs must develop and offer programs that meet the general education requirements of other institutions. Similarly, TCUs must also align their programs so students meet requirements for state licenses. TCUs that access state funding for vocational programs must abide by the state's rules for program design, enrollment, reporting, and review. Finally, TCUs may partner with other TCUs. The benefits include greater collaboration, resource sharing, and course sharing, which may limit the programs a TCU creates. For smaller TCUs, these limits or constraints may be highly beneficial as they provide clearer direction for program development.

Conclusion

This study examined how five tribal colleges and universities understand and implement quality assurance practices. TCUs are unique postsecondary institutions because they serve a predominantly Native American and Alaska Native student body. Furthermore, they have a dual mission to provide culturally based academic programs that meet tribal and community workforce needs.

Little research has been conducted on quality assurance practices in the TCU setting. Yet the characteristics that make TCUs unique may influence their quality assurance practices and pose challenges when seeking and maintaining accreditation.

The five TCUs in this study have developed a similar four-step process to assess new academic programs. They also used similar processes to review current academic programs. These similarities across TCUs are likely the result of years of working with and applying the recommendations of accrediting and regulatory bodies.

We also found all five TCUs were actively engaged in vertical and horizontal program development to offer students more credentials and degrees. Students benefit because they do not have to leave their communities and they develop valuable skills for tribal and community jobs.

The leaders, faculty members, and staff members in this study noted that the dual mission of TCUs was always top of mind throughout their quality assurance activities. For example, new program proposals and reviews of existing programs must show how they have incorporated tribal culture and educational philosophy. The mission may create cultural incongruity between TCUs and accrediting bodies.

Despite these challenges, TCU staff spoke positively about how the review process improves their academic programs. For decades, TCUs have offered quality, culturally based, accredited academic programs to the benefit of their students and communities. The findings from this study provide a foundation for future research about quality assurance practices at TCUs. The findings can also help TCUs to understand what their peers are doing and to strengthen their quality assurance practices while staying true to their mission for decades to come.

References:

American Indian College Fund. (2023a, January). *Seven Generations: A framework for ensuring tribal college sustainability* [Research brief].

American Indian College Fund. (2023b, January). *Whatever it takes: Creating pathways for student success at tribal colleges* [Research brief].

Humphreys, D. & Gaston, P. (2019). *Unlocking the nation's potential: A model to advance quality and equity in education beyond high school.* Lumina Foundation.

Stull, G., Spyridakis, D., Gasman, M., Samayoa, A., & Booker, Y. (2015). *Redefining success: How tribal colleges and universities build nations, strengthen sovereignty, and persevere through challenges.* Center for Minority Serving Institutions, University of Pennsylvania. https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/345