

Native Language and Culture from the Perspective of Turtle Mountain Community College

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About Me

- Director of Research, Assessment, and Accreditation
- Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC)
- Process data for the institution (internal, external reporting, analysis, assessment of student learning, etc.)
- Main point of contact for accreditation matters, aside from president. Also a peer reviewer for the Higher Learning Commission.

About Me: Language Revitalization

- Grant director for Administration for Native Americans (ANA) grant
 - Focus on language revitalization for the Ojibwe Language
 - Current status: developing resources specific to regional dialect; publishing to college website; working with p-16(+) educators; engaging parents and preschool children
 - Two “master speakers” are training apprentices to gain fluency and diverse skill sets. Employment is already secured in local k-12 education system.
 - Securing published instructional resources for educators and families.
- In sum: this position affords me access to dynamics ranging from preschool through higher education graduation placement.
 - Acknowledgement: Not an “expert” on p-12 grade levels, but I engage with them.

What I Hope to Convey Today

- Outline challenges confronting students in Native American higher education and in earlier age groups.
 - Some challenges are external, structural, and specific to education organizations.
- Recommend reasonable, realistic solutions
- What we are already doing
- Indigenous education organizations have to work much harder than “mainstream” ones.
 - We have the same fundamental expectations as any other educational system.
 - We are working to accomplish more, and we have more to lose if we don't.

Dynamics in the Turtle Mountain Community

- Shortly stated, indigenous language is highly strained. Reasons may be summarized as follows:
 - Though taught in virtually all educational systems, language and culture are siloed into specific courses that take up a small minority of student focus at any given time.
 - K-12 instructors affirmed that language and culture are not systematically integrated; high case loads exist. Additionally, each school has been siloed from one another.
 - Fixing this internally is difficult and can be rife with highly sensitive issues amongst instructional staff and administrators.
 - Likely source of this tension: state-mandated standards, particularly in “core” subjects (math, English, social studies, science, etc.)
 - Exceptionally small land base relative to tribe’s size is a strong factor.

Community-Wide Recommendations for All Native P-12 Education Organizations

- Examine other tribal communities.
 - Are language and culture siloed from other subjects of study, or are they systematically integrated? If the latter, what can be learned from this and formalized at the state level?
 - Are educational organizations communicating with one another and with the tribe, or are they each operating independently and in an uncoordinated fashion? (lateral and vertical organizational connections)
- Examine how state standards are articulated to tribal schools. Reinforce from the state level appropriate integration of language and culture.
 - Students have an inherent right to this, and all organizations have responsibility.
 - Standards and state resources have the potential to profoundly reinforce language and culture, if done right.

What the Community Is Doing

- Drafting a resolution to organize systematic improvement throughout all education organizations within the tribal borders and (ideally) just outside of them.
 - Meant to establish an internal accountability and reporting method for all educational organizations in the community.
- Leveraging funding from federal sources to secure resources and stimulate professional development and family-focused exposure, especially at the young ages.
- BIE and p-12 educators and administrators are eager and receptive to diverse connections, and these are strengthening between organizations.
- All of this work is ongoing, and in some ways nascent. Much is still needed.

Entry Data at TMCC (Reported for AY2020)

Speakers of AI/AN Languages						
Question	AI/AN			Non-Native		
	Male	Female	Other	Male	Female	Other
None	106	188	0	2	6	0
Limited	34	63	0	1	0	0
Conversational	2	3	0	0	0	0
Fluent	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	142	254	0	3	6	0

- Snapshot of data reported data from AY2020 to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium
- Data is taken from entering student records; this is what TMCC sees once they reach our institution.

What our Graduates Say (AY2021)

In regards to tribal knowledge while at TMCC, I learned...				
Multiple Choice	Not at all	A little	Generally	Proficiently
From a curriculum where tribal studies were an integral part of all courses that I took	4	13	26	15
To read the Ojibwe language	14	17	20	8
To speak the Ojibwe language	14	19	18	8
To read the Michif language	23	17	15	3
To speak the Michif language	25	16	15	3
To serve toward the betterment of my tribe as a contributing member	6	14	28	11
To engage in the life-long pursuit of knowledge in the intellectual disciplines	4	9	28	18
To engage in the life-long pursuit of knowledge fixed within the traditions of the Turtle mountain Band of Chippewa	5	8	30	16
To analyze current problems from a tribal/cultural perspective	7	11	27	14
About research focusing on indigenous issues	8	10	28	13

Data In Summary

- Language-related work is ongoing and in need of improvement throughout our system. Much attention to this is in process at TMCC and more broadly throughout the TCU network.
- Culture is assessed at TMCC and at other TCUs, but greater focus on this is may be needed for many institutions.
 - In discussions within the TCU network, many institutions don't explicitly focus intentional learning outcomes on indigenous-centered dynamics.
- “Siloing” language and culture into specific courses is an easy pitfall, and requires intentionality to address, support, and develop stronger reinforcement systematically.

What's Happening at TMCC

- Redesign of learning outcomes to impact the entire institution. Intent is to de-silo cultural and linguistic reinforcement.
- Consideration of professional development throughout the organization to facilitate ongoing improvement of collective language and culture skills.
- Continuous data collection from a variety of sources to understand data dynamics.
- Ojibwe language programs of study and Michif courses to bolster language skills from college-level learners. Exciting impacts from recent graduates.
- Proactive with grant dynamics relative to language revitalization.

Work on Student Learning Dynamics

- Pre- and post-test administered shows broad learning gains throughout after entry and before graduation, though this does not capture all students.
- Indigenous learning outcomes are under consideration now.
 - Meant to infuse institution-wide focus on language and culture learning.
 - Potential dissemination and adaptation to the broader TCU network.

Recent History of Accreditation

- TMCC is accredited under the Higher Learning Commission
- Most recent comprehensive **peer review**:
 - Only 1 TCU employee represented out of four total peer reviewers
 - Accused the institution of lacking in quality on a variety of factors
 - Numerous of these were overturned at a later stage of the review process.
 - Caused lots of stress, confusion, and an internal loss of trust with accreditors; burned time and resources.
- TMCC is not alone in this historical dynamic.

Accreditation Recommendation (Structural)

- **Recommendations:**

- Who is “at the table” really matters. 51% of peer reviewers evaluating a campus should come from within the tribal college network (currently employed or with at least 10 years of direct, recent employment at a TCU).
 - The accreditation agency needs to be responsible for robust recruitment amongst TCUs to ensure equitable representation.

Implications of Representation Balance

- Intensive focus on indigenous language and culture has not been as firm from accreditation agencies as it could have been. (This is not a specialization for reviewers from other institution types.)
- Institutional attention is frequently applied elsewhere, typically in operations more typical of larger or more highly resourced institutions.
 - Student learning assessment is a frequent accreditation finding. Details to follow.
- Note: TCUs are classified as a distinct institution type in the Carnegie classification system.
 - Distinction implies distinct accreditation considerations.
 - How Core Components (accreditation standards) are interpreted for TCUs specifically may need further consideration.

Accreditation Documentation Recommendation

- Draft a specific accreditation document similar to [this one](#) for all accreditation agencies – but specifically tailored for TCUs.
 - (A document tailored for TCUs exists [here](#), but this serves as a broad primer for peer reviewers fundamentally unfamiliar with tribal colleges. A deeper guide for ideal forms of evidence tailored to this distinct institution type would be beneficial.)
- What forms of evidence are relatively consistent across TCUs as best practice?
- How else can peer reviewers competently address highly complex things like language revitalization, classroom-level cultural instruction, or meaningful community impact as an essential function of TCU operations (as often stated or clearly implied in our mission statements)?

Accreditation Dynamics Continued

- Broadly: how do peer reviewers “watch out” for siloed language and culture dynamics, and how is this systematically oriented and supported throughout the accreditation agency?
- Since assessment of student learning is a frequent focus of accreditation-related improvement, this provides an opportunity to bolster language and culture education systematically throughout an organization.
- Peer reviewer accreditation dynamics related to language and cultural development need to be stronger.
 - Institutional data shows a need for language revitalization over a long period of time. Accreditation findings have not focused on this. **How we spend our time and resources on institutional improvement ultimately matters to the learners.**

Funding Dynamics with Language

- Granting agencies currently provide funding for language revitalization efforts.
- However: When funding dynamics only last approximately 3-4 years, this may not be enough for continuity of quality operations.
 - It can take at least this long just to establish a firm foundation to start meaningful work.
- Grant-jumping for this critical dynamic takes institutional bandwidth and risks losing critical employees secured under a previous grant.
- **Recommendation:** longer-term funding streams explicitly devoted to this dynamic.
 - Current language loss is no accident, and came from ample, long-term historical funding to systematically diminish language capacity of indigenous communities.
 - Obligation to revitalize is shared between the tribes and governments.

A Note of U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

- “[UNDRIP](#)” (A/RES/61/295) establishes a framework for all governments to collaborate on language and cultural dynamics, and positions indigenous communities intentionally.
- Note that these are “a universal framework of *minimum standards* for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world[...]

Pertinent Snippets from UNDRIP

- “Indigenous peoples have the **right to revitalize**, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.”
- “Indigenous peoples have the **right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages**, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”
- “**States shall**, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, **take effective measures**, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, **to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.**”

On the Declaration of Native Purpose in Higher Education

- Published by the [American Indian College Fund](#).
- All institution types have a responsibility toward indigenous citizens, not just TCUs).
- “We believe that colleges and universities have the responsibility to uphold tribal sovereignty by generating meaningful government-to-government relationships with tribal nations and tribal colleges and universities.”
- “We believe that colleges and universities have the duty to incorporate Indigenous knowledge for Native students to survive and thrive.”
- “We believe in the inherent right of all Native students to have a place on college campuses that fosters students’ sense of belonging and importance in their campus community.”

Notes from Research

- Cultural identity supports [higher rates of student success](#)
- Tribal colleges take culture and care for Native students seriously, and [data confirms](#) that this is evident to students throughout the TCU network.
- TCUs are filling a large gap with [Native education attainment and inter-collegiate partnerships](#).
- Ample [resources](#) on Native American student success in higher education exist for consideration.

Overview of Challenges

- Heavily siloed structures in all areas of education, likely driven by structural pressures external to the tribal educational systems (state standards, accreditation).
- Tribes are working to reverse more than a century of intentional efforts to eliminate Native language and culture from the continent.
- Tribal education organizations need to work harder to maintain all hallmarks of educational quality of any education type *in addition to* the highly complex process of revitalization language and reinforcing culture for all learners.
- Though much recent work has been done, data indicates significant work ahead.

Overview of Recommendations

- Intensive review of p-12 learning standards and higher education accreditation dynamics are necessary to counter existing structural pressures inhibiting progress for all tribal organizations.
 - De-siloing language and culture so that it is integrated systematically and intentionally across all organization types within a community is a necessity.
 - “Peer” review conducted by actual peers, by majority. Align documentation.
 - Ensure indigenous peoples have constant, consistent, and meaningful structural input on state standards, accreditation dynamics, and any other means by which education is expressed by external entities.
- Examine what is similar/different in other communities; inform actionable steps between indigenous nations.
- Assuring longer-lasting funding streams explicitly for language revitalization work will support sustained, consistent impacts.
- Utilize the ample documentation as guidance for supporting indigenous higher education.

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