



UNITED TRIBES TECHNICAL COLLEGE:

Using Community Vibrancy Data to Bolster Upward Mobility, Address Resource Disparities, and Build Tribal Leadership Support

United Tribes Technical College (UTTC), like many other Tribal Colleges and Universities, is engaged in active efforts to improve upward mobility for its students and the Nations it represents. As part of these efforts, UTTC is working to bolster institutional enrollment and inform students about resources that can help eliminate student loan debt. The college has been looking more closely at how it measures workforce outcomes, return on investment, and financial needs for facilities and programs as part of the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Cohort, according to UTTC President Leander “Russ” McDonald. That’s particularly important as the college seeks to help students from poverty-impacted backgrounds find economic mobility after graduation.

United Tribes Technical

College, located in Bismarck, ND, has for 50 years served over 10,000 American Indian students from more than 75 federally recognized Indian Tribes across the nation. UTTC is operated by five tribes: Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold, the Spirit Lake Tribe, the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians. UTTC has been an ATD Network college since 2017 and a Leader College since 2024.

Today, 95% of UTTC students are Native American and eligible for the Native American Tuition Waiver, and about 80% of the student body is eligible for Pell Grants. The college decided to eliminate loans and use \$1,800 of the Native American Tuition Waiver up front to create more affordable access and promote economic mobility. This ensures students have less cost, aren't scared off by potential debt, are more able to attend college, and won't incur student loan debt that can negatively impact their economic future.

Limited Research Capacity

Tribal colleges, due to their rural locations, don't always have the expertise or research capacity to study the local tribal community beyond the campus, President McDonald notes.

But with one institutional researcher and one research analyst (in addition to the president himself and the director of enrollment management), UTTC has developed a data structure to conduct accurate and robust analyses and is becoming a national leader in data management among tribal colleges.

The college's data work has been enhanced from participating in the ATD Community Vibrancy Cohort, McDonald says. Using the Community Vibrancy Framework and toolkit helped the college analyze the curriculum to determine strengths and weaknesses. Participation also enabled the UTTC team to investigate the data available for tribal communities as well as data limitations that exist for Native American populations in general. The process introduced UTTC to ATD's data partner, Lightcast, which gathers and integrates economic, labor market, demographic, education, profile, and job posting data from myriad government and private-sector sources. ATD provided a free one-year subscription to Lightcast for all the colleges in the cohort to help them connect program health and relevancy to economic mobility.

Connecting to Tribal Leadership

In discussing community vibrancy and the need for UTTC to be better connected to the larger community, President McDonald emphasizes using data to communicate to tribal councils and tribal leaders the critical role of higher education as a catalyst for upward mobility. He recalls a Brookings Institute meeting in Washington, D.C., in June 2024, where researchers, educators, and American Indian College Fund (AICF) leaders "said that, because of the tribes' limited resources and extensive needs, there is minimal support for higher education, which may be countered if more people were educated and had the capacity to access external resources to address identified disparities."

One of the ways to promote social and economic mobility, he says, was connecting his college's students to tribal leaders and building student leadership as part of the curriculum within UTTC classrooms. "The next cohort of students will include the next generation of tribal leaders and influencers who can work

to build new models of delivery and instruction and curriculum,” he says. “We need to use our president’s addresses, lunches, and our classrooms to influence the next generation to take on the challenge of strengthening the larger community.”

The Importance of Culture

President McDonald notes that tribal schools and colleges not only have to educate students and address the needs of poverty-impacted students but also must provide counseling

and support for a culture still recovering from federal efforts to assimilate and annihilate their people. “We have to recognize the intergenerational trauma and the negative stereotype of education for our people. We had our children dragged from their homes, that left families traumatized,” President McDonald says. “They grabbed our kids, put them in boarding schools, and said they mustn’t learn Dakota and must not practice a traditional Native way of life.”

UTTC has a Student Wellness Department, which includes two social workers who provide counseling and refer students to outside agencies for more significant mental health issues. Since most students are from poverty-impacted backgrounds, they are eligible for Medicaid services and North Dakota Human Services.

President McDonald notes that a key piece of community vibrancy work is using data to demonstrate the college’s needs and to compare UTTC with other institutions to strategize how it can improve educational processes while meeting the needs of the communities it serves. Participation in the Community Vibrancy Cohort gave the college new data to make comparisons so they could make the case for additional resources. For example, AICF helped UTTC develop a plan to secure \$162 million in construction funds needed to modernize the 250-acre campus initially built in 1900.



LESSONS LEARNED

Key lessons UTTC leaders identified included:

- **Use college comparisons.** Under-resourced colleges can use comparisons to identify disparities in funding and develop plans to address their unfilled needs, while data from the Postsecondary Data Partnership and Community Vibrancy Data Workbook can highlight where the need is greatest. For example, a comparison of earnings of two-year college attendees showed that UTTC students were earning just under 50% of their counterparts at other community colleges after six years of enrolling. This data includes all students regardless of credential earned and highlights the often-interrupted college completion pathway for many students. The service area data also highlighted disparities between outcomes for Native Americans versus the general population in the college’s urban area. The available data brings up the question of potential gaps, recognizing that limitations are not uncommon in national data files regarding Native American populations.

- **Develop a long-term plan that can make the case for more resources.** Having a plan gives the college a vehicle to connect with funders and the community about its capabilities and how it can move to the next level of success, including how it can address important needs based on workforce data and individual student perspectives. For tribal colleges, this activity is crucially important to complete as a community, because the majority of people who need to be involved will come from the tribe itself.



- **Get buy-in from the whole college community.** “Only students live on campus, but it is so important that the whole college community — including students and faculty — buys in to what we are doing,” President McDonald says. “Even though I live two miles down the road, and come and go to Bismark and other places, I identify with this community as my own. For the most part, most of my interactions are with people I work with and especially those who go to school here.”
- **Focus on the next 50 years.** Tribal colleges and universities have only been in existence for 50 years and need to make new plans for a sustainable future. “We are looking at the literature and using research, but I hope we won’t have to wait another 50 years to build the leadership and capacity, community connections, and educational delivery modules that we need,” President McDonald says. “That’s why work like community vibrancy [with] Achieving the Dream that cultivate student success is so important in developing modules and addressing the complex needs within our communities.”

ATD’s Community Vibrancy Framework brings ATD’s strategic vision to life by supporting colleges in moving their student success work beyond completion and connecting their institutional transformation efforts with community impact. The framework helps colleges expand access to previously underserved communities, strengthen early momentum and completion of degrees and credentials, establish greater economic and social mobility for their students, and connect these gains with stronger and more vibrant communities. It also encourages colleges to become boundary-spanning institutions and is the backbone of ATD’s approach to innovation, coaching, and service delivery. To test the framework and associated curriculum, ATD engaged 15 ATD Network colleges to be part of its first Community Vibrancy Cohort. This profile is one in a series that explores how colleges are using the framework and lessons learned to date.

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