

Tribal College and University Early Childhood Education Initiatives:



Strengthening Systems
of Care and Learning
with Native Communities
from Birth to Career



AMERICAN INDIAN
COLLEGE FUND
EDUCATION IS THE ANSWER

About the American Indian College Fund

The American Indian College Fund (College Fund) is a national and premier fundraising organization established in 1989 by tribal college and university (TCU) presidents. The mission of the College Fund is to support TCUs in reaching optimal funding levels so that TCUs can increase access to college, and foster student success. Since 2011, the College Fund increased early learning opportunities and supported the creation of systems of care and learning in seven Native communities, across seven states.

American Indian College Fund Tribal College and University Early Childhood Initiatives

The American Indian College Fund (College Fund), in collaboration with Tribal Colleges and Universities, engages in early childhood education (ECE) initiatives that draw upon child development knowledge from within Native communities melded with the best practices identified in the field of early childhood education.



Wakanyeja "Sacred Little Ones" –
Tribal College Readiness and Success
by Third Grade Initiative



Ké' Early Childhood Initiative:
Strengthening Systems of Shared
Responsibility among Native Families,
Schools, and Communities



Cultivating Lakota Early Childhood
Learning Opportunities



Restorative Teachings:
A Tribal college and university collaborative
to strengthen systems of care and learning
with Native families and children

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Letter From the American Indian College Fund President



Greetings,

Family, Culture, Institution and Community – these are the four pillars that hold up the American Indian College Fund’s Early Childhood Education (ECE) initiatives. As you will see in the stories and information provided in this report, the College Fund is honored to support the knowledge and experiences of our tribal colleges and the citizens of the tribes they serve. We support them as they build on their own family systems and cultural expertise to create more dynamic and meaningful institutional experiences to create healthier families and communities.

You will see that our work with children and their families is rooted in the strength of those families—the strength that emerges from their shared desire for healthy and happy children. This shared desire is the foundation of the commitment exhibited by all of the partners in the College Fund’s ECE initiatives from the children themselves, to teachers and ECE staff, to tribal colleges and universities, to parents and extended family members, to tribal partners, to schools and other local partners, to funders. Elders and cultural experts eagerly joined us because they know that our children are not only the expression of our deepest hope, but they are also our future leaders. We educate

and nurture our young ones so they can carry out the dreams of our ancestors to build future productive and prosperous societies.

Just as the mission of tribal colleges and universities focuses on indigenous identity and sense of place, so, too, is the focus of early childhood education. Our work proves that this focus reaps benefits—children thrive, families are empowered, and communities are engaged in institutional development and progress.

As a lifelong educator, I have often witnessed the frustrations of parents and family members who want nothing more than a loving, welcoming educational experience for their babies, toddlers, and young children. They want the environments that their children are part of to be places where their values and expectations are honored and upheld. Our work with early childhood education, educators, tribal colleges, and partners provides those environments. We are happy about that.

There are many exciting strategies shared in this report. As you read this report we hope you will find our sharing to be useful to your understanding of the transformative impact of investing in early childhood education and the vital role that tribal college and universities play. We also hope that you will consider how you can support this work, through advocacy, outreach, training, marketing, and funding. You can help us expand the reach of what we have learned, so more children and their families will have amazing experiences that increase their success and quality of life.

With best regards and heartfelt thanks for your support of Native education,

Cheryl Crazy Bull

Cheryl Crazy Bull
President and Chief Executive Officer

Executive Summary



In 2011, the American Indian College Fund (College Fund) began the work of ensuring all Native children reach their greatest potential by launching the *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" Tribal College School Readiness and Success by Third Grade Initiative, placing powerful resources in the hands of tribal college early childhood teacher education programs (and faculty), tribal college and university (TCU) early learning centers (and partners), teachers, families, and children.

The *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" Early Childhood Education (ECE) Initiative was a five-year, five million dollar initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. In addition to *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones," the College Fund has, since 2011, implemented three Native early childhood initiatives: *Ké* Family Engagement, *Cultivating Lakota* Early Learning Opportunities, and *Restorative Teachings*. The College Fund has leveraged the success of these ECE initiatives, awarding funding opportunities in the total amount of \$7.25

million dollars across seven TCUs: College of Menominee Nation (Keshena, WI); Iḷisaḡvik College (Utqiaḡvik, Alaska); Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College (Baraga, MI); Northwest Indian College (Bellingham, WA); Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (Albuquerque, NM); Salish Kootenai College (Pablo, MT); and Sitting Bull College (Fort Yates, ND). These four initiatives at seven TCUs have, to this point, directly impacted 3,975 children, 2,398 families, and 1,185 teachers. And the numbers continue to grow, through both direct service and the impact that these children, families, and teachers have on students and communities.

This report is a visionary reflective document of the first six years of a movement to transform early childhood education in Native communities, starting with TCUs as the incubators of the work and the beacons of change. The story of the College Fund's work on ECE is the story of a project, that grew to become an initiative (multiple projects), that has now become a movement, in which this work has expanded to draw interest from communities outside of TCUs, including nationally and internationally. The purpose of this report is to focus on the *process*, the ways in which building systems and structures in Native communities provides a foundation for successful and sustainable ECE programs.

This is a unique report on a unique initiative. The work is centered on building systems – fully integrated systems of care and learning in Native communities. The American Indian College Fund, in collaboration with TCUs, engages in early childhood education initiatives that draw upon child development knowledge from *within* Native communities, melded with the best practices identified in the field of early childhood education.

The College Fund distinguishes our work by focusing on and developing an Indigenous approach to early childhood education; the work is built on the principle that Native communities are the best educators of their earliest learners. All of the College Fund's ECE initiatives provide support, resources, technical assistance, and professional development for Native communities to grow their own early childhood education teachers, centers, curricula, and TCU programs of study. The outcome is that, across different TCU sites in different Native communities, the specific early learning curricula and activities will be unique to each community, based

in the community's language, culture, heritage, traditions, and modes of communication and inquiry. These initiatives incorporate purposes and processes that are focused on the achievement of both immediate, short-term, demonstrable goals, and long-term, sustainable, ongoing outcomes.

Two primary systems guide the College Fund programs in early childhood education, as they grow from projects to an initiative to a movement across Native communities, informed by a powerful and driving *Theory of Change*. One system, *Strategic Cycles of Educational Transformation*, guides the process through which these communities engage in transforming early childhood education. The second system, *The Five Domains*, comprised of five critical areas in early childhood education, guides the work that these communities do.

These projects have been successful because they have built systems of care and learning in their communities, founded on structures that are sustainable. They have grown partnerships with local and external organizations, including Head Start, local schools, foundations, and professional organizations. They continue to engage parents and families, utilize the knowledge and experience of community elders, pursue excellence in the five domains starting from their individual points of entry into the work, develop curriculum and cultural activities with parents and families, document their work, learn from what they have done, share their work and learnings publicly, collaborate across communities and institutions, and continue to improve on their work while overcoming the challenges inherent in the pursuit of educational transformation.

The movement is growing. There are always more Native children to be served, and there can never be enough people working in Native early childhood education. Investing in the TCU ECE initiatives is investing in a strong and growing system of care and learning starting with our earliest Native learners, at sites across TCUs and across Native communities, building on the strengths of our sacred little ones to create a successful birth to career pathway for every Native child. This report documents the work that the College Fund has done and continues to do in this realm through the TCU ECE Initiatives.

Introduction

Tribal colleges are incredibly important to the communities they serve and to the nation as a whole.... They're addressing a need in education that our Native American students aren't getting in most of the mainstream educational programs today.... Our needs are here. They're here. They're now. And that's what we're able to provide as a tribal college.

– Pearl Brower, President, Iḷisaḡvik College



As a parent, I know that it's important to give our children the tools that they need to succeed in life. And also, it's important as an Indigenous mother, to do as much as I can with the tools that I have been provided that we have today to reinforce our values and be able to give them a better life.

– Parent, Sitting Bull College



3,975 children. 2,398 families. 1,185 teachers.

In 2011, the American Indian College Fund (College Fund) began the work of ensuring all Native children reach their greatest potential by launching the *Wakanyeya* “Sacred Little Ones” Tribal College School Readiness and Success by Third Grade Initiative, placing powerful resources in the hands of tribal college and university (TCU) early childhood teacher education programs (and faculty), tribal college early learning centers (and partners), teachers, families, and children. At that point, our expectation was that we would have an impact on about 100 children at each of the four sites, with an associated impact on teachers and families.

Six years later, the TCU Early Childhood Education Initiatives at the College Fund has impacted: 3,975 children. 2,398 families. 1,185 teachers. And the numbers continue to grow, through both direct service and the impact that these children, families, and teachers have on students and communities.



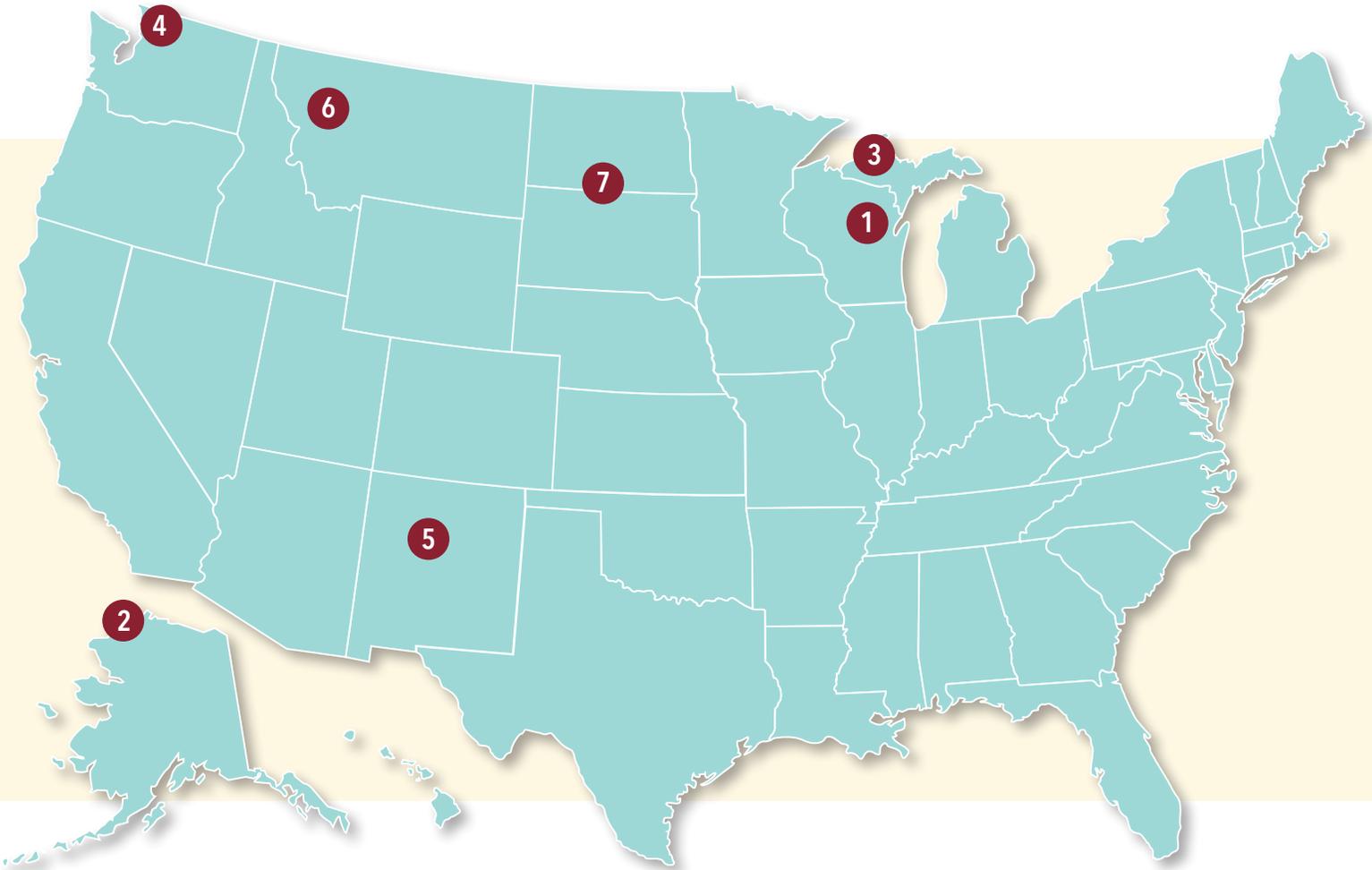
Cultivating Lakota



The *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" Early Childhood Education Initiative was a five-year, five million dollar initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. In addition to *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones," the College Fund has, since 2011, implemented three Native early childhood initiatives: *Ké'* Family Engagement, *Cultivating Lakota* Early Learning Opportunities, and *Restorative Teachings*. The College Fund has leveraged the success of these ECE initiatives, awarding funding opportunities in the total amount of \$7.25 million dollars across seven TCUs located in Alaska, Michigan, New Mexico, North Dakota, Montana, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Tribal Colleges and Universities

- 1 College of Menominee Nation, Wis.
- 2 Iłisaḡvik College, Alaska
- 3 Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College, Mich.
- 4 Northwest Indian College, Wash.
- 5 Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, N.M.
- 6 Salish Kootenai College, Mont.
- 7 Sitting Bull College, N.D.



This report is a visionary reflective document of the first six years of a movement to transform early childhood education (ECE) in Native communities, starting with TCUs as the incubators of the work and the beacons of change. This is a historic moment. Never before has the College Fund invested significant support in an area of work that TCUs have not done before – i.e., community-based transformational early childhood education – and this is the starting point of a movement to create comprehensive and transformational early childhood education systems and programs at TCUs.

The story of the College Fund's work in ECE is the story of a project that grew to become an initiative (multiple projects) that has now become a movement, in which this work has expanded to draw interest from communities outside of TCUs, nationally and internationally. The purpose of this report is to focus on the process, the ways in which building systems and structures in Native communities provides a foundation for successful and sustainable ECE programs. Examples of work and outcomes presented share the breadth and depth of the current results of the work, not to delimit the extent of the outcomes for any particular TCU or community.

The work is centered on building systems – fully integrated systems of care and learning in Native communities – in four arenas: Family, Culture, Institution, and Community. Family as a system of care and learning encompasses the support and knowledge parents and families provide to children as they grow, learn, and develop. Families are also key partners with teachers, educators, and early learning centers, in developing curriculum and assessments, understanding and contextualizing data on children, and steering and participating in community and school events. *Culture* as a system of care and learning centers on the language and culture of the children and families. Starting with the *Wakanyeya* "Sacred Little Ones" project, and continuing through the *Ké'*, *Cultivating Lakota*, and *Restorative Teachings* initiatives, the preservation of language and culture through teaching, traditions, and participation in cultural events has been a centerpiece of care and learning for Native children. *Institution* as a system of care and learning

captures the TCU, early learning centers, and partner institutions. All of these institutions collaborate and communicate to provide education, training, content knowledge, language and culture, and participation from all parts of the institutions involved to combine strengths in service of strong early learning experiences and opportunities. *Community* is a critical and comprehensive system of care and learning in terms of expertise (knowledge and skill in areas important to ECE), intergenerational knowledge (elders teaching teachers and passing knowledge on to early learners), and the importance of community support and visibility for events, ceremonies, meetings, and the sustainability of efforts in ECE.

This is a unique report on a unique initiative. Unlike much mainstream work on Native education in Native communities, it is not a historical (or ahistorical) narrative of failures – i.e., what didn't work, why we speculate that it didn't work, and why Native communities need more funding to try something that we hope won't fail next time around. By contrast, this work, captured in this report, is focused on strengths: strengths of community, strengths of language and culture, strengths of TCUs, and strengths of early childhood education and opportunities in Native communities.

We started from a place of strength – a project built on the philosophy that there are strengths within Native communities that could grow and sustain systems of care and learning for our earliest learners – and we have evolved to a place that speaks to strengths, that documents what is working, that systematically implements in community-appropriate ways the best of early childhood education systems and practice for Native communities. This is a project that grew into an initiative that has become a burgeoning movement that will impact children, families, and teachers for generations. We will program for impact, document what TCUs and communities are doing, and build on and sustain what is working. This is the driving philosophy of the College Fund TCU Early Child Education Initiative.

Context & Framework

People often ask, "Why tribal colleges?" Well, TCUs are one beneficiary along this continuum. We hope these young ones will find their way into a tribal college to become another leader to replicate a highly positive experience for the young children.... We're thinking lifelong.

– Tarajeen Yazzie-Mintz, Vice President, Program Initiatives, American Indian College Fund



The American Indian College Fund, in collaboration with tribal colleges and universities, engages in early childhood education initiatives that draw upon child development knowledge from *within* Native communities, melded with the best practices identified in the field of early childhood education. The College Fund and TCUs have been in partnership since 1989, a collaboration initiated and created by the TCUs (TCUs, from within tribal communities, established the College Fund) that has raised funds, implemented programs, and brought resources and knowledge into Native communities, all in the service of empowering tribal communities to address societal, educational, environmental, economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges.

The College Fund's TCU ECE Initiatives are built on several philosophical and strategic principles. Philosophically, the initiatives are guided by a framework focused on five domains of work: *Family Engagement, Teacher Quality, Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skill Development, Strengthening of Pre-K to K-3 Transitions, and Incorporation of Native Culture and Language in Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. Strategically, these initiatives incorporate purposes and processes that are focused on the achievement of both immediate, short-term, demonstrable goals, and long-term, sustainable, ongoing outcomes. These purposes and processes include:

- ▶ Creating a collective strategy for educational transformation
- ▶ Designing and implementing systems and structures of care and learning
- ▶ Working from a theory of change that prioritizes strengthening family, teachers, and community engagement
- ▶ Focusing on critical and foundational areas such as health and wellness, economic security, and culturally-based education, with the purpose of strengthening birth-to-career pathways that ultimately lead to educated children and racial equity
- ▶ Accessing and building partnerships with both local and national individuals and organizations who can assist communities in achieving their goals for early childhood education

Our family is a part of a community. Our community helps other parents in their successes and support groups in the goodness for each other. Our children have also become friends beyond the classrooms because of our dedication to the initiative....It is always good to share and incorporate children in processes of what lies in their future, it gives them an understanding of what they will do when it comes time for them to be parents. They would be a part of their future children's lives.

– Parent, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute



All of this work is built on the principle that Native communities are the best educators of their earliest learners. All of the College Fund's ECE initiatives provide support, resources, technical assistance, and professional development for Native communities to grow their own early childhood education teachers, centers, curricula, and TCU programs of study. The outcome is that, across different TCU sites in different Native communities, the specific early learning curricula and activities will be unique to each community, based in the community's language, culture, heritage, traditions, and modes of communication and inquiry.

The Role of TCUs in Addressing Early Childhood Education



Northwest Indian College is primarily a teaching institution. It is exciting to build research with the kids.

– Justin Guillory, President, Northwest Indian College

SUPI's Early Childhood Education Program, the recipient of Restorative Teachings, has really become a well-known entity in our SUPI community, bringing quality programs and initiatives to our community that are professional and well-organized. For this reason my experience with Restorative Teachings has been full of fun. Supporting them and as an active parent has made me feel like an integral part of their team, and it really feels like together we are making a difference in our community.

– Parent, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute

For Native communities, the needs are immediate and present. The paths to addressing those needs are present in the community as well – not at a distant research institution, not outside of the community – and begin with the earliest learners. While it may be counterintuitive that institutions of higher education have a role to play in early childhood education, TCUs are critical to this ECE work. TCUs provide a link between preservice teacher education (training ECE teachers) and early learning centers and classrooms. Further, TCUs are sustainable intellectual centers that are culturally and contextually situated to guide, foster, and design educational transformation from within tribal communities.

In too many places and for too long, education has been driven by programs, activities, and term-bounded grants. The result is that there are repeated short-term cycles of success and failure. Whereas in some communities the short-term cycles can be absorbed by the size of the community, the distance between the educational institutions and the community, or the sheer number of programs and options, in Native communities the urgency of needs, interconnectedness, and importance of language, culture, and education calls for a working model that builds on the most fundamental aspects of our communities. Toward that end, the College Fund's ECE initiatives are built on the goal of creating and developing systems

of care and learning, involving TCUs, early learning centers, parents and families, elders, organizational and community partners, and community members. These systems of care and learning are now driving the early childhood education in Native communities. In this way, education, pedagogy, and curriculum are developed within the community, helping the community manage challenges, resist fads and trends, avoid reliance on individuals or individual grants and programs, and connect early learning with the cornerstones of Native communities: culture, language, history, values, and traditions.





The question is often asked, *Why is there a need for Early Childhood Education work when Head Start is an established option in Native communities?* First, Head Start does not exist in every Native community. Second, Head Start, Early Head Start, Home Visiting, and similar programs (including National Indian Head Start) are external programs, originated and developed outside of Native communities. The value of these programs is significant, particularly when adapted for use in Native communities. The TCUs in our ECE initiative often partner with the local Head Start on activities, events, and professional development; this partnership is beneficial for both the TCU and the Head Start. For example, the ECE initiative at Northwest Indian College invites the Lummi Head Start to join for Family Fun Nights and cultural events for children and families. In this way, all of the community's children and families can participate together, sharing resources and spreading the impact of the ECE initiative throughout the community.

However, the College Fund distinguishes our work by focusing on and developing an Indigenous approach to early childhood education. We start from co-visioning with Native communities about their needs, desires, and hopes for their children. We know that the needs of children from birth to age eight in Native communities are vastly different from the needs of children and families in other communities. Our work is based on the premise that change in communities originates within those communities, within families, and, as a result, this work has a greater chance of success and sustainability than an externally developed program implanted in the community.

Iļisaġvik College, along with its partners in the North Slope Borough School District (NSBSD), developed the Iļupiaq Learning Framework (ILF), the foundation upon which the NSBSD articulates its curriculum. The ILF is an Indigenous, community-created, sustainable framework that will guide education from birth through schooling on the North Slope. Through the ECE initiative, with technical assistance and support from the College Fund, Pausauraq Jana Harcharek and Cathy Tagnak Rexford of the North Slope Borough School District, published *Remembering Their Words, Evoking Kijuniivut: The Development of the Iļupiaq Learning Framework* (*Journal of American Indian Education*, Summer 2015). Iļisaġvik College and its partners in Utqiaġvik, Alaska, have demonstrated the power and sustainability of an Indigenous vision that originates and is created within the community, is developed along with partners, and is regarded as a guiding purpose and process for education, starting with the earliest learners.

TCUs, as the intellectual centers of Native communities, often created by the tribes themselves, and training the next generations of teachers, are well-situated to play a key role in connecting the various stakeholders in Native communities, partnering with early learning centers, and generating knowledge and collaboration to make this work successful and sustainable. TCUs conduct inquiry in tribally appropriate ways, including assessments of knowledge and child development, and are being prepared to not only create systems of care and learning to benefit Native families and communities, but also to examine those systems of care and learning to strengthen and improve early learning education and opportunities. This is the crux of the purpose and benefit of investing in this unique work in early childhood education in Native communities.

Ultimately, the purpose of building systems of care and learning in Native communities is sustainability. Can we build systems and structures and practices and methodologies that will sustain children from birth to school into the workforce? Can we create a pathway for students that takes them from early learning to higher education in a TCU to work within their community, having been taught their language, culture, and traditions from their earliest years? Can the connection between our earliest learners and the community-based TCU build a trajectory for Native children that strengthens communities and creates generations of children who productively contribute to and find success within their communities? The College Fund believes that building systems of care and learning from birth to adulthood and beyond will do all of these things, strengthening our communities, our community members, our families, and our language and culture.

There is a great and urgent need for systems, structures, and sustainability of care and learning in our Native communities. Our need is here. Our need is now. We start addressing that need with our earliest learners. In 2011, we started with four project sites, grew to an initiative, and we have now created a movement in early childhood education in Native communities. The work has expanded through a process that has been gradual, intentional, and planful, and is connected to local, regional, national, and international conversations about opportunities in Native early childhood education.

The ideal vision of Native early childhood education is built around the generation of new (and restored) systems that are informed by historical challenges and the innovative engagement of families. These TCU ECE Initiatives are successful because they are driven from the center of Native communities: families. This is the story of the American Indian College Fund's TCU Early Childhood Education Initiatives.



Tribal College and University Early Childhood Education Initiative

*The name of our project is “We Make a Path by Walking.”
And we realize we are just beginning this path.*

– Cyndi Pyatskowitz, Project Director, College of Menominee Nation

Four projects comprise the American Indian College Fund TCU ECE Initiative. The founding project was the *Wakanyeja* “Sacred Little Ones” Early Childhood Education Initiative, from 2011 to 2016, awarding a portion of the total grant of five million dollars to four tribal colleges to engage in the process of strengthening systems of care and learning for early childhood education. The second project was the *Ké’* Family Engagement initiative (\$600,000, including a \$100,000 match, from 2014-2015), which set out to strengthen the engagement of families in their children’s education and the relationship between TCUs and families. The third project was *Cultivating Lakota* Early Learning Opportunities (\$25,000, from 2015-2016), a project that funded work at Sitting Bull College to

develop Lakota language immersion curriculum and assessment. The fourth project in the initiative is *Restorative Teachings* (\$1.5 million, from 2016-2018), developed with the goal of systems of health and wellness towards securing Native families. The seven TCUs that were funded through these projects were: College of Menominee Nation (Keshena, Wisconsin); Iḷisaḡvik College (Utqiaḡvik, Alaska); Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College (Baraga, Michigan); Northwest Indian College (Bellingham, Washington); Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (Albuquerque, New Mexico); Salish Kootenai College (Pablo, Montana); and Sitting Bull College (Fort Yates, North Dakota). Table 1 presents the four projects and the TCUs that were funded through each.

The Four TCU ECE Projects and Funded TCUs

	<i>Wakanyeja</i> Sacred Little Ones 2011 - 2016	<i>Ké’</i> Family Engagement 2014 - 2015	<i>Cultivating Lakota</i> 2015 - 2016	<i>Restorative Teachings</i> 2016 - 2018
College of Menominee Nation	✓	✓		✓
Iḷisaḡvik College	✓			✓
Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College				✓
Northwest Indian College	✓	✓		✓
Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute	✓	✓		✓
Salish Kootenai College				✓
Sitting Bull College		✓	✓	✓

Our vision is a large one, but it has to start with the babies, with the sacred little ones.

– Diana Morris, Interim President, College of Menominee Nation

These four initiatives at seven TCUs have, to this point, directly impacted 3,975 children, 2,398 families, and 1,185 teachers. Though large numbers in themselves, these figures only account for those who directly participated in programs and activities funded by the initiatives. They do not take into account the children, families, teachers, and community members who have and will reap the benefits of these initiatives beyond the terms of each grant program. For example, the preservice teachers at SIPI who have experienced a stronger teacher education curriculum and program as a result of these initiatives will have an impact on a greater number of students, families, and teacher colleagues in their future work in the field. The 22 books produced by College of Menominee Nation (CMN) that are publicly available on the CMN Sacred Little Ones website have been read and utilized by multiple teachers and

communities within the state of Wisconsin, in surrounding states, and internationally. The work at CMN has the potential to widely impact literacy curricula in Native communities, through both direct use and, more importantly, implementation of the process CMN employed to create the stories, get permission from tribal cultural authorities, and publish the stories on the website. Other Native communities can take lessons from CMN's work to produce their own books with associated literacy lesson plans in their own languages, deepening the reach and impact of this work on the sustainability of Native communities beyond those funded through these initiatives.

The American Indian College Fund Early Childhood Education initiatives are directed by nationally-recognized educator and scholar, Dr. Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz, currently Vice President of Program Initiatives at the College Fund. Yazzie-Mintz has stewarded the early childhood education programming at the College Fund to national visibility, building upon collaborative inquiry, authentic engagement of Native families and communities, and focus on long-term sustainable educational programming and practices. Under Yazzie-Mintz's leadership, the TCU ECE Initiatives continue to grow and are increasingly reaching more TCUs, teachers, children, families, and communities.

Yazzie-Mintz has designed two primary systems to guide the College Fund programs in early childhood education, as they grow from projects to an initiative to a movement across Native communities, informed by a powerful and driving *Theory of Change*. One system, *Strategic Cycles of Educational Transformation*, guides the process through which these communities engage in transforming early childhood education. The second system, *The Five Domains*, guides the work that these communities do within early childhood education. The following sections describe the Theory of Change and these two foundational systems for building systems of care and learning for early childhood education in Native communities.



TCU ECE Initiative Theory of Change

We were given an advocacy voice towards the type of curriculum we want for our children to be exposed to. Our parents have come together and created projects that our children are able to see in their classrooms and school grounds. For example, our planting project has been a huge influence on our children and they get to see parents on certain days of the week pulling weeds and maintaining the garden for the children. The children would run to the fence and give their support, welcoming, and thanking. You can see their gratitude and appreciation of their garden.

– Parent, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute

The College Fund's theory of change centers on strengthening the factors that support building responsive educational systems and structures that in turn contribute to sustaining high-quality, culturally-informed early learning opportunities for Native children. The cyclical processes to refine practice, curriculum, engagement strategies, program implementation, and documentation of achievements, ensures that as cultural communities change, the systems of care and learning will change, in respective and planful ways.

In 2013, the College Fund brought together TCU presidents, College Fund staff members, and other stakeholders in the TCU Early Childhood Education Initiative to develop a guiding vision for the work, based both on the lessons we had learned up to that point and our ideas for the future direction of early childhood education in Native communities. The vision is articulated in this way:

The educational sovereignty of tribal nations is rooted in their cultures and languages and is enacted throughout the systems and structures of the tribes, emphasizing traditional knowledge and learning. Educational sovereignty recognizes the right of Tribes to socialize their own children and supports parents and extended families as the foundation of children's education. With the support of tribal governments, relationships between institutions, children, their families, and their communities are seamless. Tribal Colleges and Universities lead restorative collaborations inclusive of community-based participatory research, educator training, curriculum development, and tribally-appropriate assessment.

– TCU ECE Strategic Planning Committee, June 2013



The methods by which we have evaluated (and continue to evaluate) our efforts to develop systems of care and learning include both qualitative and quantitative approaches to documenting vision, planning, implementation, reflection, and sustainability. Over the six years of the College Fund's TCU ECE initiatives, we have employed multi-level inquiries to capture information and impact within and amongst multiple learning and engagement spaces:

Individual Level

- ▶ **TCU ECE student** (e.g., increased learning opportunities and engagement for TCU ECE students)
- ▶ **Individual early learning classroom** (e.g., instructional practices)
- ▶ **Children's learning opportunities** (e.g., collection of children's work and increased culture-based and language-rich learning opportunities)

Institutional Level

- ▶ **TCU teacher education degree program** (e.g., revisions to existing program curriculum and development of new courses and practicum experiences)
- ▶ **Early Learning Center** (e.g., center-wide practices and trainings focused on the five domains of the initiative)
- ▶ **TCU institution** (e.g., impact on institutional change and development of leaders as a result of the project)

Community/Tribal Level

- ▶ **Home-to-school** (e.g., family and community engagement)
- ▶ **Tribal community** (e.g., engagement with tribal leadership, elders, culture and language commissions)
- ▶ **Locally-driven inquiry**, prioritizing key areas of need identified by the community/families/tribe

Systemic Level

- ▶ **Pre-K to K-12 Education** (e.g., professional learning communities, expansion of networks across systems, such as standards and accrediting organizations)
- ▶ **Across TCU institutions** (e.g., systemic impact)
- ▶ **Across inter-tribal communities** (e.g., best practices in ECE and culture-based instruction across diverse tribal communities: rural, suburban, urban, reservation/non-reservation, international)

Our theory of change guides the work we do with sites and communities, operating on multiple levels and driving the transformation in early childhood education in Native communities.

Strategic Cycles of Educational Transformation: Systems Development

Native families and children that are served by early learning centers are not vulnerable populations. They come from communities that are rich in language and culture and history...What we want to do is to enact the systems that existed far before any formal non-Native systems were put in place.

– Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz, Vice President, Program Initiatives, American Indian College Fund



The early childhood education initiatives to strengthen systems of care and learning are built on intentional transformational acts, generated from within communities. Building strong foundations in early learning and transforming early childhood education in

Native communities require intentionally building strong and critical infrastructure, instructional innovation, purposeful outreach and creation of partnerships, and the development of intellectual innovation. Preservation of our approaches to Indigenous learning is an intentional act – a commitment someone in our lives took on to ensure we have a connection, relationship and lifelong grounding in who we are as Native/Indigenous peoples. We commit to these intentional acts on behalf of future generations of Native children.

There are four critical steps to generating and continuing these intentional acts:

- 1) Possibility:** We envision what is possible. Something – an event, a person – made us understand that this work is a possibility. We imagine that possibility and that guides us in this work.
- 2) Commit:** We commit to making this happen. Not by ourselves, maybe not forever – we commit to work on this now to start the process of making this happen.
- 3) Enact:** We enact our role in making this happen. Others have roles to play as well. Starting with the first step, we take the steps to do what we can in our roles to make this happen.
- 4) Persevere:** We continue to persevere and sustain this work. Either we are continuing to do the work, or we are training others to join the work and continue on. This allows the work to persevere and sustain, with us now and beyond us later.

Since mičhiŋkšǐ [my son] Jesse has been in the school at the Lakota Immersion Nest, our home environment has been filled with more pride in who we are as Lakota. It has brought a sense of healing, knowing the language is spiritual in nature. I am a proud parent knowing our language won't die. Mičhiŋkšǐ's spirit will help illuminate our beautiful way of life as Lakota and will show the world a peaceful way of living.

– Parent, Sitting Bull College

Based on these steps, we developed a framework of strategic cycles. Using this framework, Native communities engage in a process of transforming early childhood education with families, community members, and partners. The framework begins with a visioning and co-visioning process, in which community stakeholders think together and imagine the future of early childhood education for their earliest learners. Then they begin to develop systems – connections,

relationships, partners, and curriculum – on which to build early childhood education. Next comes implementation of systems, followed by authentic assessment of those systems, using tools and knowledge from within the community to document the work. Finally, reflection, dissemination, and further reflection: sharing the stories of the work, reflecting on the journey to this point, and envisioning the future of early childhood education for our Native children.



Vision – Looking back and building knowledge and scaffolding structures toward the future



Systems Development – Program, partners & curriculum – Integration and building connections



Implementation – Program & curriculum development to deepen engagement and celebrating our emergent story



Authentic Assessment – Program Impact: Marking our journey, from start to finish so as to write our stories

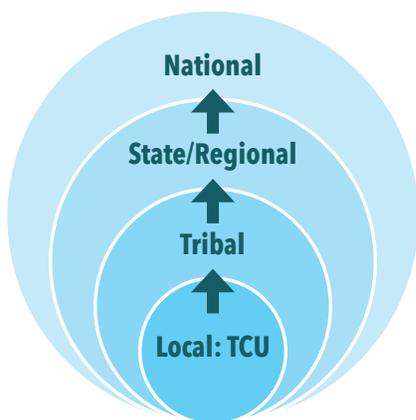


Reflection, Dissemination & Reflection – Sharing our collective story & envisioning the future together

To address the complex and dynamic nature of these project goals, we launched phases of work from different points of departure, honoring each of the TCUs and their respective tribal communities' capacity to engage in this work from varied levels of development, readiness, and knowledge.

While capacity to engage in powerful and transformative educational change programming is critical, the role that tribal colleges and universities play is just as important if not essential for directly generating opportunities to produce innovative approaches toward addressing and engaging larger educational and racial equity goals.

Our strategy included working from local and tribally specific needs, growing successful processes and lessons, outward to inform wider community change and engagement, and then to expanding regional and national efforts. The investment in building local and TCU capacity cannot be understated. When tribes and their respective TCUs have the opportunity to identify critical areas of need for foundational systems development, there is increased potential for delivering innovative educational (instructional, institutional, and measurement) changes at the local level, resulting in direct impact with young children served by TCUs, their partner centers, and teachers.



Our strategy to select four different tribal colleges as a starting point for the *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" project, serving four (and more) tribal communities, contributed to our long-term effort to develop cross-site model programming unique to and based in respective community needs. For example, to meet our domain of work for increasing teacher quality and strengthening instructional approaches, we now have four different points of departure and four

different ways in which TCUs may enter the work of strengthening teacher training and instructional innovation within their respective TCUs and with partner early learning centers. TCUs that want to learn from our work can now start with support and model programming for their point of departure.

For three *Wakanyeja* TCUs, engaging Head Start teachers was a point of departure for initiating critical discussions about how to build learning opportunities upon the richness of tribal culture, history, and language. For one TCU, tribal language, culture, and historical knowledge served as the root to developing the Iñupiaq Learning Framework and the Iñupiaq language immersion nest envisioned to educate infants to Pre-K and beyond. Approaches to achieving the goal of increasing teacher quality and instructional knowledge were situated within four tribal contexts; the ability to build upon what was already working depended upon availability of expertise and resources developed at each site.

Today, with the expanded TCU ECE initiative, we know that in seven tribal college programs, early childhood teachers are provided with enhanced training, learning opportunities, and degree programs that place strong focus on:

- 1) Development of observational skills of children's learning (e.g., revised practicum)
- 2) Access to knowledge for developing culturally and developmentally appropriate curriculum (e.g., engagement in new course offering training to develop Menominee stories)
- 3) Increased knowledge to document children's learning (e.g., research and practicum experiences on documenting children's learning, and adoption of *Teaching Strategies Gold* for teachers working in the local early learning center)
- 4) Increased opportunities to deepen their knowledge of early childhood education, theories and practice within Native communities (e.g., annual opportunities to engage in local, regional and national professional development focused on the TCU ECE Five Domains)
- 5) Expanded strategies for connecting with teachers from different levels of education, contributing to school readiness from infants, to toddlers, to preschool, and on to K-3 education



Similar programs across the country may engage in transformative program implementation, informed by a theory of change. Ours is informed by many theories, some of which are culturally-informed theories emerging from the tribal communities within which we have worked, some of which emerged from cross-TCU site analyses,

and additional theories which emerged from engagement with national and international partners. Ultimately, our theories of change helped us understand the impact of engaging in educational, social, and cultural change in the following ways:

- ▶ Prioritize Indigenous knowledge systems which serve as the critical backbone to transforming and sustaining improved social, cultural, historical, political, and educational systems
- ▶ Vision, plan, implement, and evaluate from places of strength and collective processes
- ▶ Engage in collective strategic cycles of implementation and reflection, honoring different frames of time and speed of development
- ▶ Purposefully grow and expand programming with careful consideration of available knowledge and resource capacity
- ▶ Focus on local development of appropriate culture-based curriculum and assessment, and allow for collective engagement of Native language speakers, cultural knowledge keepers, leaders, and families
- ▶ Develop strategies that impede outside pressures to standardize knowledge as a critical part of the process, reaching the ultimate goal of sustaining effective place-based program development, implementation, and evaluation
- ▶ Engage in dialogue about adaptation of processes and place-based/culture-based curriculum development and assessment after site-specific advancements in process and material outcomes
- ▶ Implement strategic cycles of programming by engaging diverse change levers to reach Individual, Institutional, Systems, and Community levels of change
- ▶ Measure children's learning within strong instructional environments, informed by engagement in assessments aligned with learning opportunities and cultural education goals
- ▶ Remain solid on the teachings of being Iñupiat, Menominee, Coast Salish, Lakota, Dakota, Ojibwa, and Indigenous
- ▶ Engage in building partnerships that honor the richness kinship relations have to offer
- ▶ Focus on the landscapes in which transformational projects take place as they powerfully shape vision, planning, implementing strategic programming, and documenting lessons learned

Five Domains

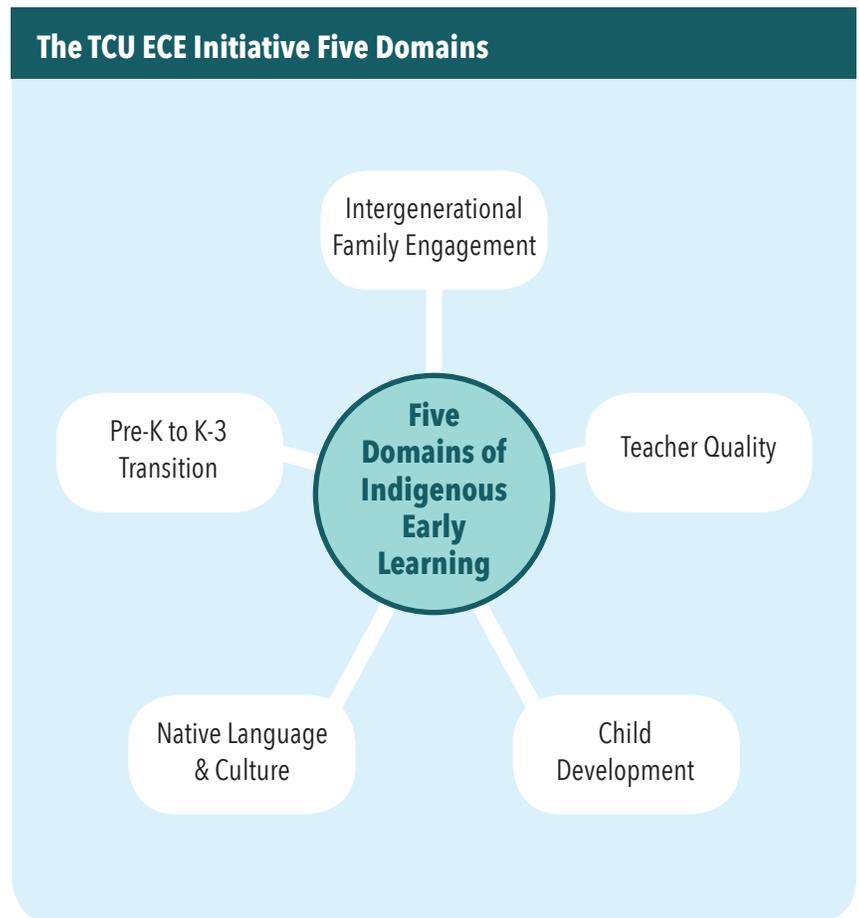
The whole project with its five domains was...the coming together of all of the kinds of initiatives that I think need to be taken for early childhood education to really work and for tribal communities to thrive with early childhood really playing a very foundational role.... These five domains looked at everything: at children, at families, at communities, at birth to grade three, at empowering families and parents, and tribal language and culture as a foundation of everything we do.

– Shelley Macy, Project Director, Northwest Indian College

The Five Domains provide targeted areas of work for the College Fund, TCUs, and Native communities in transforming early childhood education. The Five Domains are strategic objectives that serve as pillars for the work: anchors that keep the work focused on five critical areas in early childhood education, and guideposts for future efforts within communities.

The TCU Early Childhood Education Initiative Five Domains are:

- 1) Strengthening early childhood **teacher quality** and instruction
- 2) Strategic and **intergenerational family and community engagement**
- 3) Documenting **children's developmental skills** (cognitive and non-cognitive)
- 4) Integration of **Native language and culture**
- 5) Successful pathways from **Pre-K to K-3 education** and beyond





For the overall initiative, these Five Domains are foundational areas of work; for the individual TCUs and communities, the domains serve as entry points. The funded TCUs enter the work through one or two of the domains, and from there expand their work to the other domains. For example, Sitting Bull College (SBC) starts their work from the integration of language and culture; as SBC President Laurel Vermillion has said, "Everything we do at the college is guided by our teaching of Lakota and Dakota language."

Through the entry point of integration of language and culture, SBC has both engaged families and the community, getting parents involved in learning the Lakota language as their children are learning the language in the Lakota Language Nest, and strengthened teacher quality, by providing professional development for teachers to learn the language and strengthen their skills as teachers.

One of Northwest Indian College's (NWIC) entry points into the work was creating successful pathways from Pre-K to K-3 education and beyond. Developing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) by involving teachers at various grade levels from the early learning center at NWIC, the local Head Start, and the local school district, NWIC strengthened teacher quality and instruction. Joint professional development across schools and grade levels provided the opportunity for shared learning, joint planning, and the improvement of both teaching and learning for Lummi children.

As anchors for the ECE initiative, and as entry points for TCUs and individual projects, the Five Domains constitute a system of care and learning encompassing critical and foundational areas of work in early childhood education.

Domain #1: Strengthening Early Childhood Teacher Quality and Instruction

We are preparing teachers to be the best that they can be, and not just academics. This grant helps us focus on the holistic student.

– Chris Fried, Sitting Bull College

We are talking about real human interaction at its fullest and most important. Children, families, parents who love their children, and the people they entrust their children to in early learning programs.

– Shelley Macy, Northwest Indian College

Strengthening early childhood teacher quality and instruction is key to the transformation of early childhood education in Native communities, through both the improvement of teaching and the development of the next generation of teachers for Native communities.

The College of Menominee Nation used this domain as an entry point to then also focus on integrating language and culture, engaging families, and incorporating literacy through the development and publication of books for use in ECE classrooms. College of Menominee Nation learned the importance of fuller integration of Native culture, history, language and contextual knowledge into courses across the entire teacher education preparation curriculum, where seven foundational teacher education courses were revised to include an “American Indian focus in Teacher Education courses across the ECE/literacy courses.” In preparing teachers to incorporate Native language and culture in curricula, lesson plans, and assessments, a generation of teachers develops who think about teaching and learning from an Indigenous perspective, and students both on and off of the tribal lands are afforded the opportunity to connect to and learn their culture through schooling:

This project allowed Teacher Education faculty to develop the guiding principles in our program, to allow all of our Teacher Education students to know Native American traditions and culture or to learn these for [the] first time. [These principles guided and] integrated their learning about child development and effective teaching strategies. Students were placed in field placements at the Menominee Head Start, Keshena Primary school, Menominee Tribal School and surrounding districts with large percentages of Native American enrolled students to design appropriate lessons, implement lessons and when done reflect on their practices through written reflection essays. (CMN Annual Report, 2015, p. 13)

Entering the work through efforts to strengthen teacher quality and instruction, CMN also worked on engaging families in their children's education from the first steps in the children's learning:

This ambitious project not only helped preservice Teacher Education students, Pre-K and primary classroom teachers but also moved to a strong focus on parents understanding and appreciating how their child's Menominee (tribal) culture contributes to the child's learning. (CMN Annual Report, 2015, p. 13)

Across the TCUs, observations support the notion that when Native children have repeated and sustained opportunities to be taught by creative, highly-qualified teachers and experiences that are powerfully enhanced by family engagement in learning activities, the chances for children to acquire abundant cognitive and non-cognitive skills increase.



Expanding improvements toward increasing early childhood teacher quality have included teaching preservice teachers *how* to design and develop culture-based curriculum, age-appropriate learning activities and assessments. Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI) and College of Menominee Nation both engaged in this process from different points of departure. SIPI worked directly with families, and from that collaborative work emerged Indigenous-based curricular units that have been used and refined over three summers. CMN designed, developed and published 22 picture books based on Menominee language, culture and values. CMN's approach was to conduct this work from within their TCU program with preservice teachers. Both approaches resulted in beautiful material outcomes in terms of contributions to their teachers' development and sustainable practices that can be carried forward.

Iłisaǵvik College has progressed from having no existing A.A. degree program in early learning to envisioning, designing, and launching its first teacher education program. With the Iñupiaq Learning Framework guiding the work, Iłisaǵvik College has made great strides toward creating a sustainable pool of early childhood education teachers for the children of the community:

To achieve [the goal to improve early childhood teacher quality], we created an Iñupiaq Early Learning degree in addition to offering short-term trainings to support residents in providing quality in-home childcare. We also supported the NSBSD in providing professional development for teachers new to the North Slope who were not familiar with the region and/or culture. An additional strategy was to hold summer camps

for middle and high school students in an effort to generate interest in the profession and create a pipeline for graduating high school students. To this date, 25 students from the North Slope and other rural regions in the state (including Alaska's only reservation, Metlakatla) have participated in camps, which are led by a certified teacher and an Iñupiaq Language Teacher (ILT) from the NSBSD. (Iłisaǵvik Annual Report, 2015, p. 9)

Salish Kootenai College (SKC), through the *Restorative Teachings* initiative, used strengthening early childhood teacher quality and instruction as an entry point to provide professional development in the areas of health and wellness to teachers of children with special needs and their families, at the same time strengthening the ability of teachers and preservice teachers to work with children without disabilities as well. Partnering with the Special Olympics of Montana, SKC is bringing together its Traditional Indigenous Games and a task force of community elders and language specialists to integrate the Special Olympics, Indigenous Games, and Salish and Kootenai languages. The first group of 40 teachers, preservice teachers, and educational professionals has engaged in this initial training, and will be provided ongoing professional development. Through the entry point of strengthening teacher knowledge and skill in these areas, SKC has also worked to integrate Native language and culture, engaged families and community members, and strengthened the school readiness of all of the community's earliest learners.

Through the ECE Initiatives, 1,185 teachers have been directly trained through activities and programs of the funded initiatives. The improvements made to teacher education programming benefit both the TCU degree programs and partner early learning centers. The context and the approaches to providing training to teachers fall on a continuum of practice. For example, Northwest Indian College offered many different opportunities for practicing teachers to engage in continuous training and professional development, with many of these teachers experiencing ongoing training and professional development throughout the initiatives.

Domain #2: Strategic Family and Community Engagement

I have worked in this field for 25 years. In my past experiences, we would have two families show up. At Little Eagles, we have 50 families for Family Fun Nights.

– Kim Swanson, Keweenaw Bay
Ojibwa Community College



We want to change our community, one family at a time. We have great hope.

– Nacole Walker, Sitting Bull College

The opportunity that was extended to me to attend the Ke' Family Engagement Convene and the Native American Special Education conference were monumental in the learning process for me as a parent of a special needs child...learning new techniques to help alleviate frustration we experience as well as my rights and responsibilities in both understanding and working within an Individualized Education Plan, which has catapulted me into helping another parent I know work through her child's IEP and changing the perception to using it as a parent tool/resource.

– Parent, College of Menominee Nation

To do meaningful work with Native families and communities, it is necessary for TCU faculty and their TCU ECE student-teachers to *directly* engage families and young children. Over the course of the TCU ECE initiative, TCUs increased time and opportunities for TCU faculty and their students to contribute to and learn from partner early learning centers. Families in this initiative were central collaborators driving innovative programming and areas of work.

For example, at Iłisaǵvik College, there is a high value placed on community engagement, particularly in the development of culture-based learning opportunities for young children. Elders, parents, and community have contributed to numerous events throughout each year. At College of Menominee Nation, the entrance to family engagement was working directly with TCU students who are also parents of young children. Engaging these TCU parents/students was a strategic way to support their learning about child development, engaging in culture-based play, and increasing early literacy development. Southwestern Indian Polytechnic

Continuum of Family Engagement: Forms of Activities



Chaperone field trips or attend a school event



Visit their child's classroom (more than twice a month)



Routinely read to their child



Engage in collective inquiry, data analysis with teachers



Engage in developing curriculum and implementation of specialized learning opportunities

Institute's work demonstrates the power of families, leading a research inquiry to define key areas of skills and learning for their children. The work on family engagement at SIPI informed how the college prepares their early childhood education teachers for work in the field. At Sitting Bull College, the work on learning language was intimately connected with family engagement. As Chris Fried, Project Director and Division of Education Director at SBC says, "Family engagement in early childhood education is important to provide students and families the opportunity to support each other. The Lakota Early Learning Opportunities grant allowed us to provide new opportunities for our families to engage as well as support in the way of childcare so parents could take Lakota language classes. These classes allowed our parents to use and understand the Lakota language so they could be engaged with their students who were learning in Lakota."

Over the course of the initiative to this point, 2,398 families have been directly impacted by work at the TCUs. While this is an enormous number of families to be impacted in this kind of initiative in these kinds of communities, the numbers do not tell

the entire story of family and community engagement. TCUs took different approaches to family engagement, based on the needs of the communities and the resources available. Northwest Indian College's approach was to hold larger and less frequent events that supported community and family engagement. Other TCUs held frequent family engagement events working closely with returning cohorts of families.

The types of family engagement events fell on a continuum of practice from passive involvement to strategic informed engagement. The graphic below highlights family engagement activities reported on a continuum of engagement. Cross-site analyses suggest that TCUs sought to develop highly-engaged opportunities for parents to participate in the project. For example, engagement of families in collective inquiry and analysis of data is qualitatively different from simply serving as a fieldtrip chaperone in which the parent plays a much more passive and predetermined role. The continuum of engagement activities result in different levels of relationship-building, trust, and shared responsibility as parents learn to purposefully and powerfully support their child's/children's education.

Domain #3: Documenting Children's Developmental Skills toward School Readiness

We want these kids to be successful. To identify in positive ways with who they are.

– Jackie Trudeau, Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College

What I really enjoy for myself was the literacy night, because my daughter's gonna be starting kindergarten. So when the lady who came talked to the parents about... what to teach your child, what to do, how to read a book, most of those stuff we were already doing, but we didn't really know why, why we were doing it, but we did that. So like the dry-erase boards that we got that night really help my daughter how to start using her letters, identifying sight words, and things like that, was really, really informative, and we still use that every evening.

– Parent, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute

Native children served by the TCU ECE Initiative have bright futures ahead of them. Together, teachers, parents, preservice teachers and community members hold strong commitments to ensure the children thrive, from birth to Pre-K to K-3 and beyond. Not once have those who accept responsibility for these children's futures wavered on the fact that Native children need their cultures, languages, and access to their heritage in order to build strong aptitudes and stamina for learning in multiple spaces and across interdisciplinary educational pursuits.

Supporting Native children to reach their greatest potential in demonstrating school readiness is a shared goal by all sites. It is also a domain of work that requires teams to slow down the process and intentionally peel back the layers so as to align efforts across sites. We wanted to achieve improvement of skill acquisition with families and children – in a way that values purposes of education envisioned by each community.



Examples of Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills Developed



Language & Literacy

- Improved culture-based instruction
- Cultural books
- Informational books
- Literacy-rich parent engagement



Numeracy

- Counting in different languages
- Culture-based concepts of counting
- Concepts of time (seasonal and cultural calendars)
- Sorting shapes and numbers with culturally relevant manipulatives



Socio-emotional Development

- Large and small group learning
- Culture-based stories about relations with each other and with the natural world
- Parent engagement in play nights



Fine & Gross Motor

- Learning to dance & "hunt"
- Culture-based play nights
- Learning to sew
- Learning to draw, paint, and write
- Culturally-relevant games

How and why support varied approaches to developing whole-child development, we asked? We learned by asking reflective questions guiding our understanding – that together we needed to be realistic about the ability and capacity to measure cause-effect impact within a short period of time. Our strategy was to first support teachers, educators, and families to learn about whole-child development and appropriate ways to document children's progress toward isolated skills and broader developmental milestones. The Initiative named cognitive and non-cognitive skills in the areas of language and literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development, including interpersonal and independence at developmentally appropriate levels. Improvement of children's understanding of their heritage identity, language, culture, and history were central and significant

goals. And a focus on increasing children's gross and fine motor skills played a role in remembering and honoring the landscapes from which Native people come.

*To achieve our goal of increasing young children's progress toward school readiness, each site started from a place of strength. We asked, *What is it that we are currently doing that supports key areas of child development? What stories and histories from our respective tribal communities inform our pursuits?* and *How can we build upon what we know to ensure children have access to the engaging learning opportunities that support acquisition of school readiness, life-long skills and sustained connections to children's respective Native identities?**



These questions continue to be asked and answered. We can report that the foundational systems are in place to pursue continued improvements to early learning programs that will benefit young children into the future. Partnerships have been created to sustain the work toward measuring children's learning outcomes. Because each TCU serves different children and families situated in different tribal communities and centers, they implemented different assessments.

Iḷisaḡvik College used parent observational surveys to understand children's development outside of the early learning center, and in the classroom they piloted an Inupiaq language assessment, which is under continued development. And to study school readiness of language nest children, they utilized the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL), which they report, "reflected that Uqautchim students progressed at the same or better rate than their public school counterparts" (Iḷisaḡvik Annual Report, 2015, p. 11).

Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute and their partner Head Start documented children's development using the Learning Assessment Profile (LAP), and they reported that the preschool classroom they worked with "...showed growth in all areas measured. [The focal classroom] showed a significant growth in the area of Social and Emotional Development. In cognitive areas measured, the most significant gains included the areas of Mathematics and Language Literacy" (SIPI Annual Report, 2015, p. 8).

These forms of gains are expected for young children engaged in early learning programming. The SIPI team continues their work and data collection to learn more about the Indigenous curricular units which feature developmentally appropriate activities in science inquiry, mathematical thinking, gross and fine motor activity, and early literacy, and other important areas of learning.

We are confident from the reports and observations that there are important gains toward school readiness demonstrated by the thousands of Native children impacted by this initiative. We also know there are many, many ways in which children showed development toward becoming strong, healthy, resilient, culturally-rooted, spirited learners, and ready for engagement in life and all that life has to offer them. The SIPI team articulates it best when they honor the many contributors who added to their success:

There were many other voices shared about how Sacred Little Ones initiated non-cognitive development through providing cultural activities for the children and their families. The development of non-cognitive attributes is a trait that can be instilled in children and lasts throughout adulthood. These characteristics of the children are positively changing the culture of the learning environment and community for enrichment of Native culture and language. (SIPI Annual Report, 2015, p. 30)

The SIPI team captures the notion that school readiness does not stand alone as an outcome; it is connected to Native language and culture, family engagement, and teacher quality.

At the same time, while school readiness is a domain and a goal for the ECE initiatives, it is imperative not only that children are ready for school but that schools are ready for children. In *Connecting Educational Communities to Engage in Collective Inquiry: Creating Professional Learning Communities as Sites of Action Research*, Nahrin Aziz-Parsons, Project Director for the TCU ECE Initiatives at Northwest Indian College, documents the process of conducting a collective inquiry at NWIC focused on the research question, *How can we, as a learning community, design a system of care and learning that prepares children for schools, and schools for children?*



Through this collective inquiry with teachers and families of Lummi children, Aziz-Parsons articulates a set of foundational beliefs and a series of "bridges" (Bridge of Content and Curriculum, Bridge of Pedagogy, Bridge of People, Bridge of School Cultures, and Bridge of Cultural Differences) that support schools becoming ready for children (Aziz-Parsons, 2017).

Domain #4: Integration of Native Language and Culture

We teach them songs. We don't want those to die off. It is fall season so we are teaching them about the harvest.

– Tom Redbird, Sitting Bull College

A culture-based and culturally-informed education for young children requires moving beyond simplistic “add-on” approaches to curriculum design, development, implementation and evaluation. Culturally-informed early childhood education requires educators, teachers, parents, and community to re-envision the role that school plays in the lives of Native children and reach a practice that prioritizes whole-Native-child wellness. Wellness in this context is providing direct, rich, and purposeful access to children’s Native language, culture, history, natural resources, and intergenerational kinship relations.

Multicultural scholars have written about the benefits of connecting children’s learning within multiple spheres and contexts of learning, including joining educational purposes with those of the child’s cultural history, heritage, and language. In our work with tribal colleges, this stance is critical for Native early childhood to become responsive to tribal community needs and existence. Across each site the ways in which this work unfolds is along a continuum, from “add-on” to unveiling deep cultural protocols to daily routines in teaching, relationships, and human cultural existence.



Iłisaǵvik College’s work is instructive to our pursuit. They began with conceptualizing whole-child development informed by Iñupiat epistemology. Starting from those firmly rooted ideas emerged the Iñupiat Learning Framework (ILF). A theoretical approach that informs program design, curriculum and assessment from the words of our ancestors is pure and grounds young Iñupiat children in place: the Arctic Tundra. An outside curriculum, a non-Iñupiat curriculum, guiding early learning simply cannot replace the essential knowledge children will acquire about the land from which their subsistence comes, or the knowledge about the different colors of the sky that leads one to the ocean, or the force and direction of the wind, or making clothing from the animals of that Arctic land and sea. These are culture-based teachings.

It has connected my father's generation to my daughter's... My dad knows the language and can speak it, but doesn't. Since my daughter has been in the Nest, I have heard him speak more Lakota to her than I ever heard from him growing up.

– Parent, Sitting Bull College



Evident in the language nest classroom is surface and material culture (i.e., picture books, number charts, hunting camp drama area, blocks that represent the context and activities). Also present all around these children's engagement in learning are deep culture and protocol (i.e., history, relationships, song, connection to the universe, sustenance, movement, textures, tastes, visual and sound cues, that amount to a way of being *l̥n̥upiat*).

Indigenous culture also plays a key role in how *l̥l̥isaġvik* College documents, describes, and analyzes its work. In *Breaking Trail for Community Impact: The Development of an Early Learning Program on the North Slope of Alaska*, Birgit Meany, Project Director for the TCU ECE Initiatives at *l̥l̥isaġvik* College, uses the metaphor of "breaking trail" – what the whaling crews of *Utqiaġvik* do to prepare for whaling season, cutting through the ice to get close to the water to set up camp – to describe the process, challenges, and successes of creating early childhood education on the North Slope (Meany, 2017).

The hope and dream of many Native communities is to reach this vision. The College Fund's TCU ECE Initiative offers a time and space in which TCUs can speak hopes and take small and long strides to bring to life their dreams.



Across the work of the other four domains – work with increasing teacher knowledge, empowering families, documenting children’s development, and strengthening children’s movement between developmental milestones – Native culture(s) and language(s) serves a central role in supporting, guiding, and enacting innovative education and learning outcomes.

At College of Menominee Nation, while developing 22 Menominee story books and learning kits, the team discovered hidden protocols that they needed to engage in order to reach the material outcomes. Following tribal protocols to design books that tell the story of the Menominee constitutes a foundational act of *gifting* knowledge to one another. It’s not enough to just write books – it’s expected one asks for permission to tell the story. The team spent over nine months collaborating with the tribal cultural commission to ensure the stories were authentic and that they serve the purpose of gifting Menominee knowledge to Menominee children.

At Northwest Indian College, the team was required to adapt their thinking regarding the teaching of the Lummi language. Members of the Lummi nation – elders, cultural leaders and language speakers – serve a critical role in defining who and how the language is to be taught and when and how it will be spoken. Educational sovereignty in terms of language learning is clear. Lummi tribal members speak the language and can teach it. How a non-Lummi team engages in culture- and language-based education will look and feel different than it would if led by a Lummi tribal member. The circumstances that Northwest Indian College’s team faces is not surprising – it’s the reality, not just among this community but among many other tribal communities. Therefore, our investment in this work prioritizes supporting Lummi teachers to acquire the teaching credentials and early childhood education background in order to become their tribe’s next generation of leaders to support revitalizing Lummi culture and language. Outcomes related to language and culture integration look different at Northwest Indian College than a program like Iḷisaǵvik College’s *Uqautchim Uglua*.

At Sitting Bull College, the focus on Lakota and Dakota language and culture is central to their work with children and families. The proposed outcomes for their *Cultivating Lakota* Early Learning Opportunities project included developing nine lessons for a Lakota language immersion curriculum, an aligned assessment, and professional development for teachers. Faced with the challenge that Lakota was never a written language prior to outside contact, and that the process to standardize the writing and spelling system is ongoing, the SBC team nevertheless created 37 weekly lessons for the language immersion curriculum, going far beyond the initially-proposed outcomes and creating great value for the investment in SBC’s work. As Laurel Vermillion, President of SBC, states, the work on this project created great value for children, teachers, and curriculum: “This funding has assisted in developing appropriate and accurate curriculum for our children and teachers, as well as strategies for teaching. The curriculum that was developed is truly representative of our Lakota/Dakota culture, language, values, and ways of knowing.”

As part of the *Restorative Teachings* initiative, Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College (KBOCC) used language and culture as an entry point to focus on health and wellness and securing families, developing a project titled, *Abinoojiinh Waakaa’igan*, targeting Native families and children of the Anishinabe Tribe in L’Anse, Michigan. Partnering with Little Eagles Early Learning Center, KBOCC Core Team, Language Literacy and Family Success Kit Committee, Curriculum and Assessment Committee, Media Committee, and Networking Committee, KBOCC uses *Bimaadiziwin* (“The Good Life” in the Anishinabe language) as a holistic approach to take care of self, family, and community, envisioning the project to first “live the good life” and then to develop a “family” within the project. At the Little Eagles Early Learning Center, KBOCC implements the Anishinabe culture, traditions, ceremonies, and language through modeling, resources, and mentoring the children.

As part of this initiative, KBOCC has developed two language, literacy, and family success kits. Each of these kits can be utilized by a child or adult, with themes such as: *Ojibwa Language; Breaking Down Stereotypes; Maintaining Cultural Traditions; Health, Safety and Wellness*. KBOCC also conducted home visits titled, “An Assessment of My Family’s Wellbeing *Bimaadiziwin*,” to enhance relationships with children and their families, to identify goals, and to develop action steps toward goals.



Domain #5: Creating Successful Pathways from Pre-K to K-3 Education and Beyond



To know where you are going, you need to know where you came from....All of our children have diverse backgrounds. We need to see them as wonderful little beings who can support each other, encourage them to be mindful and respectful of diversity of knowledge and background.

– Deborah Parrish, President, Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College

We now have an AA degree in Inupiaq early learning. Language promotion needs to start early....This project has brought on a conversation about becoming a four-year institution. We had not considered this before.

– Birgit Meany, Academic Dean, Iḷisaḡvik College

Quintessentially, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to unearth the effect that connections among educators (i.e., everyone who comes into contact with young Lummi children in early learning programs, including teachers, administrators, teacher assistants, bus drivers, cooks, etc.) would have on bridging early learning with kindergarten through grade three (i.e., creating smooth transitions allowing Lummi children to thrive in their current classrooms and when they move from one program/level to the next).

– Nahrin Aziz-Parsons, Project Director, Northwest Indian College

Creating smooth pathways supporting successful transition from preschool to elementary schooling includes building relationships and developing trust with parents and children. For example, from Year 1 to Year 5 of the Wakanyeya “Sacred Little Ones” initiative, the parents and children at SIPI benefited from workshops supporting transition into kindergarten:

In Year 1 and 2 SIPI established relationships with families who were involved in the initiative. In Year 3 relationships were established with 3 families who provided report cards for their children during kindergarten. In Year 4 SIPI began to develop relationships with children who had experienced the cultural curriculum at the YDI site for two years. In Year 5 SIPI solidified relationships with transitioning children who had now experienced the curriculum for 3 years. SIPI also provided various interactive and informative workshops for parents throughout the year. (SIPI Annual Report, 2015, p. 3)

SIPI continues to implement this process throughout its ECE initiatives, which includes gathering information on children and families experiencing transition to kindergarten, so as to learn about this process from the perspective of the children and families themselves. The lessons learned inform their work with preservice teachers and with their Head Start partner center. By Year 5 of the Wakanyeja ECE initiative, we saw a system developed to support families and children, as their positive experiences were bridged into the kindergarten experience. This process to inform transition did not exist before the Wakanyeja ECE initiative. These are new practices that are working and are being sustained. At SIPI in Year 4 of the Wakanyeja ECE initiative, three SIPI families and children transitioned from preschool to kindergarten, and data collected signal positive transition into kindergarten. Report card data collected in 2015 "...indicated that all students were performing successfully in kindergarten" (SIPI Annual Report, 2015, p. 9). These families return to SIPI to engage in continued participation in the work of the tribal college and their early learning center.

Another way in which transitions are supported by the TCU ECE Initiative is developing transitional systems that include "...bridging (1) content and curriculum, (2) pedagogy, (3) school culture, (4) tribal to non-tribal communities, (5) and people/individuals" (NWIC Annual Report, 2015, p. 17). Northwest Indian College utilized Professional Learning Communities to sustain their efforts for Pre-K to K-3 transitions, and also for bridging the NWIC Early Learning Center with other early learning centers, such as the Lummi Nation Head Start and the Lummi Nation School.

[Without Sacred Little Ones] I wouldn't have met the kindergarten teachers from Eagleridge or Lummi Nation. It's nice to talk to them about what they're doing... [Y]ou don't get that usually, you know, in a school district... and so I liked that. (Personal communication, Lummi Head Start Teacher, March 30, 2015) (NWIC, Annual Report, 2015, p. 19)

While the practice of Professional Learning Communities was developed at NWIC through the first phases of the TCU ECE initiative, it was built into a system that endured beyond the boundaries of the first grant, and has now become a sustainable system that impacts teachers (through professional development), children (through the



attentiveness of adults to creating pathways for them from Pre-K to K-3 and beyond), and the curriculum (as teachers work to understand and align the curricular path for children as they move through different grade levels in different schools). Thinking deeply about systems, as in the case of Northwest Indian College, highlights the complexity of institutional collaborations that must be created to ensure sustained supports for Native children across multiple learning contexts, and for the teachers stewarding young children's learning.

What we learn from the TCUs on their work in this domain brings to the forefront the critical need to deeply understand the intense political nature of bridging vastly different educational institutions and the educators within those spaces. Graduating from preschool to kindergarten is not a luxury taken for granted in Native communities. The transition from preschool to elementary education is a historical marker for many families who hold tightly onto dreams for their children to acquire high-quality education that leads to increased benefits in career options, economic security, and life success. The investment in tribal colleges and universities supporting and navigating these contested spaces absolutely creates increased opportunities for Native children and families to remain engaged in the pursuit of educational attainment.

Impact of the TCU Early Childhood Education Initiative

We hope that when we invest in this process that families will always be at the table, and that they will draw the plans for that sustained effort of more families being at the table and changing the face of early childhood education.

– Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz, Vice President, Program Initiatives, American Indian College Fund

We have been a part of this program since Sacred Little Ones. I wanted to continue participation because I have always enjoyed the connectedness of the people in the program. I feel like this program has been reciprocal to our family, we learn and benefit and we also try to do our best to participate and volunteer during activities.

– Parent, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute

The last time I did Special Time with my 2 year old daughter, she brought me a book. I started to read it, but she kept changing the pages, so I just read what parts I could in the quick split seconds she allowed me. She started pointing out things in the pictures. Then she said, "Mom, Mom. Look at me, Mom." I knew she wanted me to see her – truly see her. It was as if it was a replacement for all the times I was at work, at school, doing homework, looking at my phone, or what-have-you. She wanted to look at me looking at her, knowing that I see her, knowing that I love her.

– Parent, Northwest Indian College

There are various ways of measuring and understanding the range and diversity of impact of the TCU Early Childhood Education Initiative. Two particular focal areas are *program impact* and *research impact*. In looking at impact, important questions are: *In what ways has the initiative increased knowledge about early childhood education, and for whom was knowledge increased? What changes were made in programs, practices, approaches, and beliefs about early childhood education?*

In creating and strengthening systems of care and learning with Native communities from birth to career, we have focused on multiple levels of programming, which creates impact on several levels: *Individual, Institutional, Community/Tribal, and Systemic*.

At the *individual* level, the impact is on children, TCU students, teachers, parents, and families. Through this initiative, children have access to learning about and through their culture, language, and history. An example of the initiative's impact on children is at College



of Menominee Nation, where CMN students and faculty created children's books in Menominee so children can learn literacy through their Native language and traditions. An example of the impact of the initiative on TCU students is at SIPI, where the focus has been on strengthening the teacher education program. Through emphasis on engaging with families in the early learning center to develop curriculum and activities, and through emphasis on nation-building, future teachers prepare for their roles as leaders in Native communities. The initiative impacts current teachers by providing professional development opportunities, including opportunities to develop skills, gain knowledge, and conduct and present research. At Salish Kootenai College, for example, teachers (including current teachers and preservice teachers) received training to integrate Special Olympics, Indigenous Games, and Salish and Kootenai languages. These teachers are now more prepared to work with families and children with special needs (as well as those without special needs), with new knowledge on health, wellness, language, and culture. As experts on their children's strengths, parents and families are being empowered through this initiative as part of strengthening systems of care and learning to develop curriculum and analyze data. The Photovoice project at SIPI, in which families used photos they took of themselves and their children to share who they are as Native people, is one example of the way in which authentically engaging parents and families in curricular activities has an impact on the children, families, and teachers.

At the *institutional* level, there is a profound impact on the tribal colleges and universities and the early learning centers, in particular. The TCUs – College of Menominee Nation, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, Northwest Indian College, and I!isaḡvik College are strong examples – have stronger teacher education programs

at this point than they did at the start of the initiative. Incorporating language and culture as key elements of courses, preparing teachers to be leaders in their communities, having preservice teachers work on family engagement, and partnering with early learning centers all create a pronounced and positive impact on teacher education programs at these institutions. These partnerships with early learning centers also benefit the early learning centers. There is a larger pool of knowledgeable educators to work with the children in the centers, and the preservice teachers are better prepared to work with early learners when they graduate. Further, institutionally, the TCUs gain tools and knowledge from the ECE community-based projects that they have applied to their own institutional work. For example, SIPI went through a successful accreditation process using knowledge gained from the community-based and collective inquiry processes employed in the ECE initiative. In addition, faculty at these TCUs have elevated the standing of their institutions through their presence at national and international conferences, through the research inquiry they have conducted and published, and through the new knowledge they have contributed to the field. Finally, TCU ECE Project Directors have taken on leadership roles in their institutions and on committees of national associations, contributing to their TCUs beyond early childhood education.



The impact at the *community/tribal* level is significant. At each of the seven TCUs directly involved in the ECE initiative, the home-to-school and school-to-home connection has been strengthened. In creating systems of care and learning in early childhood education, it is critical that parents and families are authentically and strategically engaged in the work of educating their children. Often in schooling environments, parents and families are brought in and expected to support the school's pre-decided activities, curriculum, and assessments. This is frequently what passes for "engagement," and leads to parents and families dis-engaging because of their lack of a genuine role in the work. By contrast, in this initiative, parents and families are viewed as knowledge experts on the strengths and challenges of their children, playing critical roles in the development of curriculum, analysis of data, and production of cultural events. The success of this approach is evident at each of the project sites. For example, at KBOCC, a team of veteran teachers who have been working in the field for decades are astounded at the number of parents and family members who attend Family Fun Nights. As Kim Swanson says, "I have worked in this field for 25 years. In my past experiences, we would have two families show up. At Little Eagles, we have 50 families for Family Fun Nights." This is not an accidental occurrence. It is the result of creating a system of care and learning in which families, and by extension the community through the involvement of elders and knowledge-keepers, is an integral part of the system that creates a healthy, educational environment for the education of the community's earliest learners.

Finally, there is an important impact of this work at the *systemic* level. First, at the level of TCUs, there is great knowledge-sharing between and across the sites. One of the unique aspects of this initiative is that, guided by the Strategic Cycles of Educational Transformation and the Five Domains, each TCU approaches the work of educating their earliest learners from a launch point that is determined by the community's culture, traditions, knowledge, and expertise. All sites are heading toward the same articulated goal; each will get there by a different path. These seven TCU sites have engaged with each other – at convenings, at conferences, in consultations, and as colleagues – to share experiences, learnings, and expertise. Each site brings different expertise and experience, and the cross-site collaborations are enormously productive. Second, the initiative and these TCUs have made national connections and collaborations, presenting at conferences, seeking professional development, and assisting with the development of other early childhood education programs. For example, the initiative has partnered for several years with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), hosting national forums, connecting with NAEYC's Tribal and Indigenous Early Childhood Network (TIECN), and consulting with (and having an impact on) the accreditation of early childhood programs. Brazelton Touchpoints Center at Boston Children's Hospital is a partner in training and

collaboration. Project sites have presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the premier international research organization in the US, sharing research conducted at TCUs in a forum regularly dominated by work from research-based institutions. In addition, site Project Directors have run for and been elected to offices in the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas Special Interest Group at AERA, bringing voices and perspectives from tribal colleges into the dialogue within the group of Native scholars at AERA. These are just a few of the national and international connections and collaborations with which this initiative has engaged. Third, the initiative and TCUs have made international connections as well, including presenting at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE), and learning from and collaborating with international programs and Indigenous scholars. The impact that this initiative has had at the systemic level has reciprocally benefited the initiative and the TCUs as well, with the national, international, and cross-Indigenous connections fueling opportunities to grow our own teachers for our communities and strengthen early childhood education based on Indigenous theories and perspectives.

In addition to the program impact, the initiative has had an impact on research in the field. Just as the TCU ECE initiative is built on an Indigenous approach to early childhood education with Native communities building their own early childhood programs, we take the same approach to research in Native early childhood education. Locally-driven inquiry, driven by the priorities of the community, is the most powerful, impactful, and effective research in early childhood education. Given that much research on Native communities is initiated and conducted from outside the communities, doing research for the sake of research – e.g., asking questions the researcher is interested in (rather than taking into account the needs of the community) – it is especially critical that this initiative develops inquiry from within communities.

The College Fund has been protective of research on these projects and initiatives. A number of researchers have requested data from these projects, in order to analyze them and publish articles based on them. In keeping with the philosophy that the best education for our earliest learners comes from within the communities,



the College Fund has maintained that the best research on early childhood programs comes from within the communities. Therefore, any research on these projects will be initiated and conducted from within the communities involved. As a result, in addition to evaluations conducted by external evaluators contracted by the College Fund, there have been, to date, at least seven research publications on the projects authored by individuals from within the communities served by these initiatives and tribal colleges. In addition, individuals involved with the initiative have given presentations at research conferences, symposia on the projects, keynote lectures, guest talks, and media interviews. Our purpose in this initiative is to program for impact, and document for learning and sustainability. Therefore, we will continue to document the impact of the programs, and continue to produce research from within the communities served by this initiative.

Call to Action: Enacting Possibility



The Family Play Evenings that we've had, they give us a safe environment to let our children play. And you guys, the Play Team Members, make that environment safe, so that one time a month, we have that safeness to be able to go and play. My little one always asks when we drive by the Log Building, "Can we go play with Shelley?" So that's something... That has really improved my son with his social skills, really coming out of his shell and being able to go talk to other kids.

– Parent, Northwest Indian College

What I wanted to do today was get our son involved, get myself involved....I thought this would be a good thing to get into. I also wanted my son to see us a part of it. So that's what was important to me. So that he could see us a part of a community event, something healthy, eating healthy, being social with people who are healthy. That way he gets used to people who are into the same things as him.

– Parent, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute

The Saturday events are something that my son completely looks forward to. Often times, now, when we are going somewhere he will pack his College4Kids book bag with his favorite books and take them along with him, in addition to wearing his College4Kids t-shirt with pride. "Mom, I part of College4Kids, I belong" is what I hear when it comes to College4Kids and coming from a child who is being labeled as autistic and isn't necessarily fond of school, is like music to my ears. To me, this speaks volumes for the program and the difference it is making in our life is undeniable.

– Parent, College of Menominee Nation

This work started out as four projects at four TCUs, the *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" Early Childhood Education Initiative. Though all pursuing the same overall goals for the earliest learners in their communities, each of the four original TCUs had a unique way of operating based on their community, language, culture, history, and traditions, and each of the four projects developed their own identity. Iḷisaġvik College identified themselves as the "ice breakers." Located at the "top of the world," in Utqiaġvik, Alaska, a whaling community in which the whaling crews need to work together to break the ice to create a path to the water, the Iḷisaġvik College team is breaking ice in creating a path to develop teachers within their community and for their earliest learners to learn the Inupiaq language and culture. Northwest Indian College uses the image of a net to capture their purpose and work. Located on the Salish Sea in Bellingham, Washington, on the Lummi Nation, a fishing community in which nets are used to make the catch, the NWIC team sees their project as casting and providing a wide net for their earliest learners, families, and community elders. Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, serves multiple tribal communities. SIPI sees themselves as "nation builders," engaging families authentically in educational processes and preparing Native students to go back to their chosen communities as teachers and leaders. College of Menominee Nation, in Keshena, Wisconsin, calls their project, "We Make the Path by Walking." Similarly to the ice breakers of Iḷisaġvik College, CMN is breaking new ground in teacher education, literacy, and family engagement with the Menominee children and families they serve, laying down the path to success as they progress.

These four projects have been successful because they built systems of care and learning in their communities, founded on structures and relationships that are sustainable. They built partnerships with local and external organizations, including Head Start, local schools, foundations, and professional organizations. They continue to engage parents and families, utilize the knowledge and experience of community elders, pursue excellence in the five domains starting from their individual points of entry into the work, develop curriculum and cultural activities with parents and families, document their work, learn from what they have done, share their work and learnings publicly, collaborate across communities and institutions, and continue to improve on their work while overcoming the challenges inherent in the pursuit of educational transformation.

From the beginning, the long-term goal of the College Fund TCU ECE Initiative has been to serve all TCUs that have a desire and the potential capacity to serve children and families. The initial four TCUs have served as flagship sites, in which we have learned how to most effectively do this work through visioning, planning, implementing, addressing challenges, and identifying successes. In this first phase, we have demonstrated that TCUs are the place to invest in this kind of sustainable work in early childhood education. As a result, we expanded the work, engaging three more TCUs in the fourth and fifth years of the TCU ECE Initiative. Each of these TCUs is developing and strengthening its identity within the movement to transform Native early childhood education.

Sitting Bull College (SBC), in Fort Yates, North Dakota, focuses energy and efforts on cultivating, developing, restoring, and revitalizing the Lakota and Dakota language and culture. Through their work with both children and families – on curriculum, on pedagogy, on assessment, in teacher education, through professional development, and through the Lakhóli'yapi Wahóŋpi language immersion nest – the SBC team is creating a new generation of Lakota/Dakota speakers.

Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College (KBOCC), in Baraga, Michigan, has developed a holistic approach to working with families and children of the Anishinabe Tribe in L'Anse, Michigan. The KBOCC team, along with its community partners, is working to transform the community through a project that focuses on *Bimaadiziwin* ("the good life") – taking care of self, family, and community in the areas of education, health, wellness, economic security, language, and culture.

Salish Kootenai College (SKC), in Pablo, Montana, has focused on strengthening early childhood teacher education and quality to impact children, families, teachers, and communities statewide. Integrating Indigenous Games, Special Olympics of Montana, and the Salish and Kootenai languages, the SKC team and its partners are providing strong professional development for teachers and preservice teachers, engaging families of children with special needs and community members, and strengthening the school readiness of – and the readiness of schools for – the community's earliest learners.

These three TCUs join the initial four TCUs in continuing to "break trail" and restore teachings so that more TCUs and communities can participate in transforming Native early childhood education from their respective local contexts to the world.

Since 2011, additional Native communities outside of TCUs, both nationally and internationally, have sought guidance in building their own systems of care and learning for their earliest learners.



More work is still to be done. The great Navajo leader, Annie Dodge Wauneka, implored herself and others to "Go and do more." Building on this idea, Tarajeon Yazzie-Mintz, Vice President of Program Initiatives at the American Indian College Fund, tells TCU ECE project teams, "As we do more, we have to train others to take on more." Building a system of care and learning applies both to the work done within communities for early childhood education, and to the larger work of training others to build systems of care and learning in their communities. This is what has created the movement to transform Native early childhood education.

The movement is growing. There are always more Native children to be served, and there can never be enough people working in Native early childhood education. Investing in the TCU ECE initiatives is investing in a strong and growing system of care and learning starting with our earliest Native learners, at sites across TCUs and across Native communities. Each investment in this work provides the opportunity for another TCU, another early learning center, another teacher, another family, and another child to join the movement for high-quality, engaging, Indigenous early childhood education. Investing in early childhood education is "going and doing more," building on the strengths of our sacred little ones to create a successful birth to career pathway for every Native child.

The time is now. The needs are great. The systems are working. We invite you to join the movement to transform Native early childhood education from within our Native communities.

Testimonies

Susan C. Faircloth, Ph.D. (Coharie)
Professor of Education, University of North Carolina Wilmington

"The American Indian College Fund's Early Childhood Education initiative is a testament to the power of an "ethic of possibility" rooted and grounded in Indigenous Knowledges and Ways of Knowing. Although funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, this initiative was envisioned by members of the tribal college community who recognized the sacredness of our little ones and worked to ensure that they those who educate and care for them are trained and supported in ways that honor and respect the cultural, social, and emotional strengths of these children, their families, and communities. This is a monumental undertaking that serves to strengthen the preparation of early childhood educators and caregivers, using a culturally relevant, responsive, and asset-based approach."

Joelfré Grant, (Descendant of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes)
Assistant Director of Professional Development & Project Director, Tribal Initiative, Brazelton Touchpoints Center

"Looking at the College Fund's TCU ECE Initiatives retrospectively, it is clear that significant contributions to Native ECE have been made; the systems of care around native children in these TCU communities have changed dramatically, but more importantly, intentionally through locally culturally-based ways of learning, over the past six years. The story of these Initiatives is woven from the tales of Native children, families, and communities building on their strengths to develop sustainable systems that will lead to lifelong outcomes for all."

Jacklyn Haight
Director of the Early Childhood Education Program, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

"Our youngest children in Native communities are active learners. The work of the College Fund's TCU ECE Initiative returns the cycle of learning to its natural state of being-centered on a child's sense of belonging. Simple connections are the most powerful change factors for children if the community pulls together- seven TCU ECE Initiatives demonstrated this strength through their efforts and success during the last six years."

Keiki K. C. Kawai'ae'a, Ph.D
Director, Ka Haka 'Ula O Ke'elikōlani College, University of Hawai'i at Hilo

"The TCU ECU initiatives clearly advance Native ECE through an indigenous framework that honors, is responsive to, and serves its participating communities and educational partners in cultivating vibrant Native communities through the development of fully integrated "systems of care and learning" beginning with the children in mind. The initiatives drive a sustainable legacy model that has created intellectual and cultural centers through situating Native philosophy and praxis at the core of its transformational culture-based education."



Selected TCU ECE Publications and Presentations

- Akee, R., & Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2015).** "National data - What can we learn about Native families and their engagement in early childhood education?" Symposium Panelist, American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 16-20, 2015.
- Aziz-Parsons, N. (2017).** Connecting educational communities to engage in collective inquiry: Creating professional learning communities as sites of action research. *Tribal College and University Research Journal*, 1(2), 30-58.
- Gutierrez-Gomez, K., Lansing, D., Yazzie-Mintz, T., & Towery, L. (2016).** "Sharing best practices from Indigenous early childhood education: Networking with the Indigenous early childhood network. Forum, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Los Angeles, CA, November 2-5, 2016.
- Harcharek, P., & Rexford, C. (2015).** Remembering their words, evoking Kijuniivut: The development of the Iñupiaq Learning Framework. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 54(2), 9-28.
- Lansing, D. (2014).** Preparing teachers to contribute to educational change in Native communities: Navigating safety zones in praxis. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 53(3), 25-41.
- Lansing, D. (2017).** Pathways to authentic community engagement: Phases of teacher development on a continuum of practice toward nation-building. *Tribal College and University Research Journal*, 1(2), 59-79.
- Macy, S. (2015).** Our precious babies: What our children can show us about supporting them and one another in early learning settings. *Mellon Tribal College Research Journal*, 2, 1-30.
- Macy, S. (2017).** Validating Lummi children and families: Connection as foundational to improving family engagement in early childhood education. *Tribal College and University Research Journal*, 1(2), 80-107.
- Meany, B. (2017).** Breaking trail for community impact: The development of an early learning program on the North Slope of Alaska. *Tribal College and University Research Journal*, 1(2), 108-123.
- Sarche, M., & Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2013).** "Two Tribal Early Childhood Initiatives: *Wakanyēja* 'Sacred Little Ones' Early Childhood Education Initiative and the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center." Presentation, 20th Anniversary National Indian Child Care Association Conference, Denver, CO, August 26-29, 2013.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2012).** "*Wakanyēja* 'Sacred Little Ones' early childhood education initiative from the American Indian College Fund: Initial findings. Invited Keynote Address - Tribal Gathering, First Things First Summit, Phoenix, AZ. August 20, 2012.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2012).** "*Wakanyēja* 'Sacred Little Ones' early childhood education initiative: Highlights from four tribal college funded projects." Paper, Native Children's Research Exchange, University of Colorado- Denver, Denver, Co, October 3-5-2012.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2013).** "Recognizing landscapes: Place-based curriculum in Indigenous contexts." Refereed paper presenter & Session Chair, Annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology, Denver, CO, March 19-23, 2013.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2013).** "Developing pathways to college access: *Wakanyēja* 'Sacred Little Ones' early childhood education initiative." Invited Panelist, The Role of Foundations in Post-Secondary Access and Success, 12th Annual Diversity Summit on Inclusive Excellence" Championing Equity to Inspire Change, University of Denver, Denver, CO. May 9-10, 2013.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2014).** "*Wakanyēja* 'Sacred Little Ones' ECE Initiative: Creating systems of care and learning for Native children. Invited speaker, National Indian Education Association Expert- Driven Presidential Session: Building Strong Foundations for Early Learning, Anchorage, AK. October 17, 2014.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. with the *Wakanyēja* ECE Initiative. (2015).** "Drawing upon places of strength and knowing: *Wakanyēja* communities of inquiry strengthen early childhood learning opportunities with Native children and families." Invited Speaker, *Inequality, Poverty, and Education: An Ethnography Invitation*, Communities of Inquiry Symposium. 36th Annual Ethnography in Education Research Forum, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. February 27-28, 2015.

- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2015).** Cultivating the seeds of knowledge: Empowering Native communities to transform early childhood education. Invited Speaker, INSPIRE School of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, April 2, 2015.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2015).** Shifting Native Early Childhood Education –Toward Justice and Inclusive Family Engagement at the Earliest Levels of Education, Symposium Session Chair, American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 16-20, 2015.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2015).** "American Indian College Fund: TCU Early childhood education initiatives" Featured Speaker, Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation, Billings, MT. August 17, 2015.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2015).** "Cradle-to-career pipeline: Empowering Native communities to transform systems of care and learning for Native children." Paper, National Congress of American Indians Annual Convention, San Diego, CA, October 18-23, 2015.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2015).** "*Wakanyeya* 'Sacred Little Ones' ECE & K'é Family Engagement Initiatives" Invited Speaker, Congressional Baby Caucus Briefing, *Creating a path for our children: Early learning in Native communities*. Washington, D.C. November 5, 2015.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2016).** "The power of place-based, small scale inquiry" (Section 3) in NCAI Policy Research Center. (2016). *Tips for Researchers: Native Youth Research*. Washington, DC: National Congress of American Indians.
Link: <http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/prc-publications/TipsforResearchers-NativeYouth.pdf>
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2016).** "Going and Doing More: The Development of Shared Responsibility to Transform Native Early Childhood Education." Invited Keynote Address, 9th Annual American Indian/Alaska Native Education Summit, Nevada Department of Education, Reno, NV. March 21, 2016.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2016).** "From places of strength: Cultivating early learning opportunities from within Native communities." Paper presentation, Society for Applied Anthropology, Vancouver, CANADA, March 29 – April 2, 2016.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2016).** "Tribal College and University Early Childhood Education Initiatives: Helping Native serving early learning centers blossom" Invited Research Presentation, Early Childhood Development in Indian Country: Strategies for Tribal Communities to Enhance the Well-being of their Youngest Members, Center for Indian Country Development, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Minneapolis, MN. October 6, 2016.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2017).** "Together we dream: Tribal colleges and university partnerships and interdisciplinary research to inform educational opportunity" Symposium & Session Chair, American Educational Research Association, San Antonio, TX, April 27 – May 1, 2017.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (2017).** "Engaging tribal communities and families: The acts of revitalizing language and culture while improving early childhood development and educational opportunities." Invited Closing Keynote Address, National Indian Head Start Directors Association, Annual Meeting, Denver, CO. June 8, 2017.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T., & Goldstein, G. (2012).** "*Wakanyeya* 'Sacred Little Ones' early childhood education initiative: Workshop for practitioners." Native Child and Family Conference, Albuquerque, NM, February 27-March 1, 2012.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T., & Lansing, D. (2014).** "Re-envisioning early childhood education from tribal colleges and universities." Paper presentation, National Indian Education Association: 2014 Research Forum, Anchorage, AK, October 16, 2014.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (Chair), Lansing, D., Pyatskowitz, C., Bates, D., Macy, S., & Smock, A. (2013).** "*Wakanyeya* 'Sacred Little Ones': Educating our Future TCU Students." Interactive Symposia and Poster Session, American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) 40th Anniversary Conference, Santa Fe, NM, August 7-10, 2013.
- Yazzie-Mintz, T. (Chair), Pyatskowitz, C., Lansing, D., Bates, D., Macy, S., & Smock, A. (2014).** "Imagining our Indigenous knowledge within reach of our children: Lessons from the *Wakanyeya* "Sacred Little Ones" ECE Initiative." Session, 2014 World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WiPC:E), Honolulu, Hawaii, May 19-24, 2014.

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Tribal College and University ECE Initiatives Grantees

- College of Menominee Nation (2011-2017)
- Iḷisaḡvik College (2011-2017)
- Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College (2016-2017)
- Northwest Indian College (2011-2017)
- Salish Kootenai College (2016-2017)
- Sitting Bull College (2014-2017)
- Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (2011-2017)

2017 Report Review Panel

Susan C. Faircloth, Ph.D. (Coharie)

Professor of Education, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Dr Susan C. Faircloth is an enrolled member of the Coharie Tribe. She currently serves as a Professor of Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Dr. Faircloth has more than 20 years of experience in the field of Indigenous Education, from early childhood to post-secondary education.

Joelfré Grant, (Descendant of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes)

Assistant Director of Professional Development & Project Director, Tribal Initiative, Brazelton Touchpoints Center

Joelfré has dedicated his career to the education and care of young children. He has worked with Early Head Start/Head Start, campus child care centers, and institutions of higher education throughout the United States. Joelfré is particularly interested in utilizing relationship-building strategies to create spaces for cultural conversations about issues in early childhood education. Grant currently works for the Brazelton Touchpoints Center at Boston Children's Hospital.

Jacklyn Haight

Director of the Early Childhood Education Program, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Jacklyn resides on Bainbridge Island, Washington near the Port Gamble Reservation in Kingston, Washington. Jacklyn has thirty-one years of experience in the Early Childhood field and oversight responsibility for the mental health and disability services for the program. Her interest in working with young children began as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois in Champaign/Urbana where she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology. Currently Jacklyn is active in serving on the National Indian Head Start Director's Association Board. She has been involved in leadership on the NIHSDA Board for over 10 years. In addition Jacklyn has been a member of the Region XI AIAN FACES Study since its inception- participating in multiple work groups to assure the project's success. She also serves on the Tribal Research Center Steering Committee and contributes to varied Community of Learning work groups.

Keiki K. C. Kawai'ae'a, Ph.D

Director, Ka Haka 'Ula O Ke'elikōlani College, University of Hawai'i at Hilo

Dr. Kawai'ae'a serves as the Director of Ka Haka 'Ula o Ke'elikōlani College at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. The college is the only indigenous language college in the U.S. that includes Hawaiian-medium (kula kaia'ōlelo Hawai'i) schools and programs serving students infant-toddler through doctorate (P-20 education). Her life's work has primarily focused on the revitalization and renormalization of Hawaiian as the living language of the home, community and education—a P-25 model—cradle to community— for nearly forty years. Over the last decade she has proactively focused on improving culturally responsive ways to address the preparation and improvement of teacher practice and student learning outcomes through Hawaiian strength-based initiatives such as the Nā Honua Maui Ola Hawaiian Cultural Pathways for Healthy and Responsive Learning Environments and the Moenahā culture-based curriculum design and instructional method.

**American Indian College Fund Office of Research
and Sponsored Programs Program Initiatives**

The American Indian College Fund administered the Tribal College and University Early Childhood Education Initiatives from within the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

**For more information on Program Initiatives supported
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