James Ezeilo, chief strategy of Ycer at the Greening Youth Foundation, who was born in Nigeria and was being asked to come and work for some overseers? Wouldn't that be the same thing as being asked to come and work for the United States Forest Service – a federal agency with a long history of mistreatment of Native Americans?

Dayne Goodheart performs an inspection of solar arrays installed at the Pi-Nee Waus Community Center and Nez Perce tribal administration complex on the Nez Perce Reservation in Lapwai, Idaho, April 1, 2021.

"Especially in a mainstream institution, there are these extreme silos around what environmental sustainability programs for the American Indian College Fund. It's where my background is in vocational education, and we've been working with the American Indian College Fund to actually bring those silos down. To say that's been challenging is an understatement."

Some tribal colleges have sought to fill those gaps through programs that pair green-workforce training with a more liberal-arts focus, said Kendra Teague, who oversees environmental training for the American Indian College Fund.

"The green economic boom that promises many Americans a new entry to the middle class hasn't lifted communities in this country that feel like vocational education was their natural resource or their place of pride. It's just not that sort of thing anymore. It's a lot more to do with STEM."

Training isn't just about teaching people how to build a solar panel or lay electrical wire. It's about changing the narrative and changing the perception of what a green-collar profession is.

"Returning to roots that also feels like a good business practice. We're bringing in a new stream of money for communities. It's a place where communities can actually survive. It's a technique for advancement. It gives them real-world experience and sets a foundation for 'upskilling' – when people in that field realize they need to go back to school.

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Enrollment in CTE overall is record-high demand for sustainable products and services. Meanwhile, many native communities — especially those that are concentrated in poor, rural areas —...