
National Congress of American Indians Fund



Project Title:	National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center
Award Amount:	\$902,500
Type of Grant:	Social and Economic Development Strategies
Project Period:	Sept. 2006 – Sept. 2009
Grantee Type:	Native Nonprofit

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- 4 jobs created
- 9 Native American consultants hired
- 75 elders involved
- 120 youth involved
- \$775,000 in resources leveraged
- 317 individuals trained
- 19 partnerships formed

BACKGROUND

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) was founded in 1944 in response to termination and assimilation policies promoted by the U.S. government. NCAI protects tribal sovereignty and treaty rights by monitoring changes in federal policy and informing its membership of decisions affecting their interests. With only 100 members at its inception, NCAI has grown to include tribes from throughout the U.S.

In 2003, NCAI developed the NCAI Policy Research Center (NPRC) to research issues related to tribal sovereignty and governance, federal Indian policy and tribal socioeconomic development. The NPRC

also serves as a clearinghouse of public information and connects tribal organizations through a web-based portal. Additionally, the NPRC fosters academic research by promoting and funding Native American internships, fellowships, and scholarships for Native American academics and scholars.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this project was to enhance the NPRC's capacity to provide policy research on emerging social issues identified as priorities by tribal leaders, thereby facilitating proactive public policy development.

The project's first objective was to develop and facilitate three *communities of practice* (COPs). COPs are constructed networks of individuals with varying backgrounds and expertise who regularly interact to brainstorm specific policy ideas and guide policy researchers. For this project, NPRC formed COPs for governance, climate change, and child welfare. Each COP identified priorities within its broader issue, determined which relevant stakeholders were not present, developed strategies to

involve them, and established working groups on specific topics within the priority areas. The child welfare COP was driven by questions surrounding the new Title IV-E foster care eligibility legislation, its impact on Native Americans, and the capacity needs of tribes regarding the new legislation. The governance COP focused on issues related to governing systems and codes, developing leadership to meet new challenges, citizen engagement, and ensuring Americans understand the nature of issues confronting Native Americans today. The climate change COP brought researchers, environmentalists, and tribal leaders together to explore theories of environmental adaptation and mitigation with regard to climate change. All COPs met regularly through a combination of summits, conference calls, webinars, and chat rooms; they also developed summative reports to clearly mark their progress. To complement efforts by the COPs, NCAI commissioned, published, and presented research papers addressing key gaps in knowledge identified by each COP. Staff also spent considerable effort to update NPRC's website and make it more accessible to COP members.

The project's second main objective was to develop an academic and applied research curriculum for tribal social service practitioners and native and non-native scholars working on issues in tribal communities. To do so, NCAI partnered with an established research organization and conducted over 10 major curriculum revisions, vetting various components with 275 people at 5 conferences and conducting 5 comprehensive pilot tests. The curriculum, designed to last 2 ½ days and train groups of 20-30 people, explores the rationale for research projects, their potential usefulness, and the relationship between tribes and researchers. To promote the curriculum, NCAI distributed 2,193 copies

of its first module and made the module available for free download on its website.

OUTCOMES AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

The inclusive and interactive format of the COPs facilitated participant learning, as people from different backgrounds met to converse. Staff reported that convening in this manner served as an equalizer, empowering certain stakeholders that would normally not provide input to such discussions. By actively seeking input from stakeholders not present at initial meetings, the COPs widened the policy discussions and provided a new platform from which policymakers could gather information quickly.

The curriculum and training raised the participants', many of whom were tribal leaders, awareness of the potential benefits of research for their communities. The curriculum explores the effects of culture on how an individual views data and empowers participants to appreciate and fully utilize research and data methods to the maximum benefit of their tribal communities. The curriculum also enhances researchers' understanding of, and interaction with, sovereign tribal nations. Demand for the curriculum grew dramatically by the end of the project, with several new tribes and organizations requesting training.

To sustain the project's momentum, NCAI secured \$775,000 in grant funds from Casey Family Programs and the Kellogg Foundation for COP-related activities. NCAI also developed a fee for service-based business plan to sustain the curriculum.