

Practice Brief

Implementation of Tribal HPOG 2.0: Integration of tribal culture into healthcare training programs

This practice brief is the fourth in a series developed by the Tribal HPOG 2.0 evaluation team. The briefs disseminate important lessons learned and findings from the Evaluation of the Tribal Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Program, which is sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families. The Tribal HPOG 2.0 Program supports demonstration projects that provide eligible individuals with training and education along career pathways in healthcare for jobs that pay well and are experiencing labor shortages or are in high demand. This practice brief examines how and why the Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees and their partners incorporate tribal culture and heritage into training programs.

The Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Program supports demonstration projects that provide Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and other low-income individuals with the opportunity to obtain education and training in healthcare professions. The five Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees are Cankdeska Cikana Community College (CCCC), Great Plains Tribal Leaders Health Board (GPTLHB), Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC), Ute Mountain Ute Tribe (UMUT), and Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Inc. (CITC).¹

All five Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees honor tribal culture through the implementation of their HPOG programs. Tribal culture can be defined as ways of living, values, spirituality, interpersonal and communal relationships, language, and traditions of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribes and communities.² Many tribal cultures share a common emphasis on respect, ancestry, ritual, home, kinship, traditional language, and storytelling.³ Yet tribal culture is diverse and varied across over 570 federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States. The five Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees represent diverse tribal cultures – including Lakota, Anishinabe, Ute, Navajo, Aleut, Athabaskan, Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Tlingit and Haida—with different worldviews.

There are several benefits to emphasizing tribal culture and knowledge in healthcare career pathways programs.⁴ Culturally-grounded educational approaches can help ensure that curricula effectively engage students and improve retention.^{5 6} These approaches, which create a sense of community and preserve tribal language and cultural traditions, also have the benefit of embedding cultural sensitivity in healthcare delivery. Culturally sensitive healthcare delivery has been associated with higher rates of patient satisfaction, patient knowledge of health conditions, appointment attendance, and treatment adherence.^{7 8 9}

Together with their partners, the Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees have pursued a variety of strategies for infusing tribal culture into training curricula, program services and events, and the resources and supportive services offered to students, particularly those students training to provide direct patient care. The Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees and their institutional partners emphasize cultural teachings and practices that build upon participants' tribal heritage and enrich their educational journey in becoming healthcare professionals. The following sections describe how grantees and their partners incorporate tribal culture into their HPOG programs.

Culturally Tailored Curricula

One key approach for honoring culture in healthcare training programs is by integrating tribal values and beliefs into the curricula. Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees and their partners do this at both the institutional and program level. Cultural sensitivity in healthcare profession training benefits both tribal and non-tribal HPOG participants. Native students recognize how indigenous ways of being provide the foundation for culturally sensitive healthcare services to Native American patients they may serve, and expand on their knowledge and understanding of other cultures. Non-tribal participants learn about tribal culture and values in the context of providing culturally sensitive care.

Several of the Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees and their partners are tribal colleges and universities (TCUs). TCUs provide AI/AN students access to higher education and associated opportunities while supporting AI/AN self-determination and strengthening tribal culture.^{10 11 12} Cultural values and beliefs are embedded within TCUs. For example, TMCC embeds the values that stem from their heritage and culture, expressed in the Seven Teachings of the Anishinabe People, as part of the philosophical foundation of the college.¹³ The seven teachings are wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth. All of the academic programs offered at TMCC, including the allied health professions trainings that are offered through HPOG, incorporate the traditional values into the curriculum. For example, students enrolled in

TMCC Phlebotomy Program Code of Ethics

The Phlebotomy student will:

- Gain the **Wisdom** needed to be a medical professional and become an important part of the Medical Laboratory Team.
- Be taught a **Love** for their profession and through that love will perform work that is ethical, of high quality and above all with compassion.
- Be taught the importance of respecting ones leaders and co-workers of whatever medical team they are a part of they will learn to **Respect** and protect the dignity and requests of the sick.
- Be taught the tools needed to have the **Bravery** to take that initial step to encounter their first patient with confidence.
- Be taught the importance of **Honesty** in following performance procedures correctly and how, by not doing so could effect a patient's results and ultimately their diagnosis and treatment.
- Be taught the **Humility** of acknowledging making a mistake and not to try and cover it but correct and learn from it.
- Learn the **Truth** about their patients' conditions and will be taught to hold those truths in strict confidence as if they were their own.

Source: Phlebotomy Technician Handbook, Turtle Mountain Community College.

the phlebotomy program at TMCC apply the seven teachings to the practice of phlebotomy (i.e., drawing blood for testing or donation) and use the teachings as their code of ethics, as shown in the textbox.¹⁴

Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees and their partners have also integrated specific courses that incorporate culture or address cultural competence in the healthcare professions. Training in cultural competency addresses the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to provide responsive, clinical care to culturally and linguistically diverse populations.¹⁵ For example, at Oglala Lakota College-Pine Ridge, a training partner at GPTLHB, the nursing program includes a course titled, *Professional and Transcultural Nursing with Lakota Emphasis*. This course, which covers various tribal cultures with an emphasis on Lakota culture, focuses on understanding the role of culture in caring for patients and recognizing different norms, behaviors, and communication styles.¹⁶ Components of the course include a talking circle led by a Lakota elder, cultural competency training, and a blessing of the hands ceremony, where an elder says a blessing over the students and faculty and uses a traditional medicine on their hands. One partner staff explained that this “gives the students a sense of understanding that we definitely use our hands a lot in nursing. [The elder] wanted to symbolize how important it is as far as their own practices and bringing a cultural understanding for [any] patients, and putting it into practice.” Students are also invited to participate in a naming ceremony at graduation, where they are given a traditional Lakota name.

Similarly, the social work program at United Tribes Technical College (UTTC), a training partner at CCCC, includes a course on the importance of culture in social work practice. In this course, instructors facilitate discussion among students, who typically come from diverse tribes, to understand similarities and differences across native cultures and the implications of these cultural values for counseling and treatment. For instance, instructors emphasize the importance of being culturally competent by recognizing that one's own cultural perspective may not be the same as a client's, so a counselor must develop a treatment based on the client's culture and experience.

Though tribal culture is more formally integrated into curricula at TCUs, non-tribal colleges and universities that partner with the Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees are sensitive to providing culturally competent training while honoring the lived experience of the diverse students served. For example, instructors at UMUT's partner academic institutions described the need to understand and consider diverse cultural norms in their classes, which are often comprised of students from multiple tribes as well as non-native students. In their focus on cultural sensitivity, instructors ensure that the didactic examples and materials shared are reflective of the cultural backgrounds of students in their classes. Certified Nursing Assistant instructors at UMUT noted that they address how some tribal cultural norms may not be compatible with Western healthcare service practices and treatment models; for example, they acknowledge during training that as healthcare professionals, students will be touching patients, which may be contrary to tribal cultural norms. In areas that serve diverse tribal populations, instructors and staff at academic institutions must also consider distinctions across tribal cultures as well, given different communication styles and cultural practices among tribes.¹⁷

Cultural Practices in Events and Services

In addition to integrating tribal culture and knowledge into their curricula, the Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees and their partners integrate aspects of tribal culture into events and program services. These events and services aim to bring students together, connect students with their culture and history, and build community.

For example, GPTLHB offers spiritual care and rituals as part of the HPOG program. According to staff, “Most students are Lakota, so we offer spiritual services to them where they can come and participate in a sweat lodge.” GPTLHB hosts a graduation ceremony that is open to all graduates and honors Lakota traditions. The graduation includes honor and prayer ceremonies, and speeches from professionals in the community, tribal elders, participants, and cultural speakers who speak on cultural traditions. When describing their experience at graduation, one participant reflected, “they really honored all of us and made us feel really important.”

GPTLHB also supports student participation in cultural events and services through its partners. For example, the Native American Nursing Education Center (NANEC) at South Dakota State University, a partner of GPTLHB, hosts a monthly “Soup and Learn” series, which includes a meal; a presentation by a tribal elder that promotes transcultural nursing knowledge; and time for socializing among participants, academic advisors, and the visiting speaker. The series, which runs throughout the academic year, is open to nursing students and their friends and family. “Soup and Learn” presentation topics range from sessions on using Lakota language in health care settings to using indigenous medicinal plants, bridging a Western scientific view of plants with cultural ways of gathering and using them. These presentations highlight the importance of training health care professionals to understand the culture and heritage of their patients in order to provide more culturally competent health care. Students describe that they appreciate the opportunities to incorporate culture into the program and connect with other participants during these events. NANEC also offers opportunities for mentorship from individuals with tribal and nursing backgrounds; through this mentorship, students have the opportunity to learn about how to integrate the guiding principles of Lakota culture into their everyday decision making.

Integrating Lakota Values

“The Lakota way is being collective, rather than individualistic. I was teaching the seven Lakota values to students and how to implement them in their lives: **Generosity, Fortitude, Wisdom, Courage, Honor, Respect, Humility**. We talked about how they can live their lives with these values, how they can keep those values in mind for decision making, and they will make our ancestors proud. These students need to hear words of encouragement from a Lakota healthcare professional.”

Source: PHP partner, 2020

At TMCC, there are campus-wide cultural and community events that students are encouraged to participate in and attend. Some instructors offer an opportunity to earn credit for participation in these events. Cultural events such as TMCC’s annual Language and Culture Conference provide students an opportunity to engage with Anishinabe culture and language through honor songs, storytelling, hand games, and dance. Further, the college begins each morning with a cultural ritual. As described by one

participant, “[we] smudge and one of the elders prays.” Cultural rituals are also integrated into the campus-wide graduation ceremony. As one participant noted, “they honor us traditionally and have the drum, bring in dancers and singers, and honor us with blankets and prayers.”

In addition to ceremonies and events, Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees also support participation in other activities that emphasize tribal culture. For example, the CITC HPOG program encourages HPOG participants to attend Life Skills workshops, facilitated by CITC’s 477 Education and Training program. The workshops are held in person and remotely in one-on-one and group settings to encourage social-emotional learning and enhance participants’ ability to overcome life’s challenges and obtain and maintain employment. Sessions focus on topics such as understanding participants’ strengths, communication styles, budgeting, parenting, healthy relationships, career preparation, and techniques to transition from rural to urban communities. Additionally, participants are introduced to or learn more about their heritage through the teachings of Alaska Native languages, histories, values, and traditions, such as subsistence activities (e.g., fishing, hunting, and gathering), and recognizing resiliency in the context of historical trauma. To ensure all HPOG participants have the opportunity to attend the workshops, CITC HPOG partially funds the CITC Life Skills Instructor position.

Culturally-specific Spaces for Tribal Students

Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees and their partners also identify and encourage use of gathering spaces and resources for tribal students. Spaces for tribal students offer a sense of community where they can connect with campus resources and build friendships with others that might have similar backgrounds and experiences. These resources help facilitate a more positive experience and help retain students in post-secondary education.¹⁸

The South Dakota State University, one of GPTLHB’s training partners, offers the American Indian Student Center (AISC) for all tribal students on campus, regardless of their program. The AISC is a safe place for tribal students, where they come together and create a communal environment as they adapt to and navigate higher education. The AISC also provides resources for childcare, emergency food assistance, educational support, and other needs to help students balance school, home/family, and cultural obligations.¹⁹

Other academic settings offer similar spaces of respite and social support. GPTLHB participants visit the on-campus Native American Nursing program’s education center to study or meet with peers or advisors. The Recruiting and Retention of Alaska Natives into Nursing (RRANN) program at the University of Alaska Anchorage, a partner of the CITC HPOG program, provides a variety of resources for native nursing students, including group meeting spaces, mentorship, and navigation of university policies and systems. Similarly, the Recruiting and Retention of American Indians into Nursing (RAIN) program at University of North Dakota, a partner of CCCC, also provides a variety of resources to support native nursing students, including group meeting and study spaces. When reflecting on the RAIN program, one CCCC student shared that the RAIN mentors were “like my second family.”

CONCLUSION

All Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees emphasize tribal culture to varying degrees by integrating tribal cultural values and practices into training curricula, organizing and encouraging participation in cultural events, and providing supportive spaces and resources for AI/AN students. These efforts to integrate culture and practices help to maintain tribal language and traditions, create a sense of community, and promote cultural sensitivity in healthcare delivery. HPOG participants shared their appreciation that tribal culture and values are embedded in what they are learning in the classroom and practicing in healthcare.

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¹ In 2010, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) awarded the first round of Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) to 32 organizations. In September 2015, ACF awarded a second round of HPOG grants, referred to as HPOG 2.0, to 32 organizations, including five tribal organizations.

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¹¹ Cunningham and Parker, "Tribal Colleges as Community Institutions and Resources," 45-56.

¹² McClellan, et al. "Where we have been: A history of Native American higher education," 7-15.

¹³ The Seven Teachings of the Anishinabe People. https://www.tm.edu/about_us/mission/the_seven_teachings/

¹⁴ Phlebotomy Technician Handbook. Turtle Mountain Community College. <https://www.tm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Final-Phlebotomy-Handbook1-8-28.pdf>

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