



Roles in Support of Indigenous/Ethnic Minority Peoples

Based on the analysis framework to address the research question about how TCUs and EMSIs address their various challenges, the author examined what these institutional roles were, what facilitating factors and challenges they had, how they dealt with these challenges, and how they should develop/evolve in the future. Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 present all themes summarized from the responses to the interview questions about the abovementioned five aspects of this study.

This chapter discusses the important roles TCUs and EMSIs play in AIAN and CEM HE. In this study, the author asked the interviewees to discuss the roles of their respective institutions for specific AIAN tribes or CEM groups. Meanwhile, the author also conducted a content analysis of TCU mission and vision statements and EMSI charters to triangulate the interviewees' responses.

5.1 ROLES OF TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

TCUs were founded as a direct demonstration of the Tribal College Movement under the background of the Native American Self-Determination Movement. TCUs serve as a vital tool to facilitate tribal nation building through completing their dual missions that are providing tribal members with access to culturally relevant HE and preserving their cultures, languages, and identities. Also, as place-based institutions, TCUs also play an important role in serving tribal communities. Through the

combined analysis of interviews and TCU mission statements, the themes about the roles of TCUs include promoting tribal nation building, providing culturally relevant HE, preserving native cultures and languages, and serving the needs of tribal communities.

5.1.1 *Promoting Tribal Nation Building*

Promoting tribal nation building is the fundamental role of TCUs, which either directly or indirectly appear in TCU mission and vision statements. For example, the College of Menominee Nation (2018) envisions its role as “an American Indian center for lifelong learning, integrating exemplary academic preparation and research to enhance nation building.” In addition, the recently established California Tribal College (2018) “is committed to empowering resilient, self-sustaining learners who serve their communities as leaders by strengthening Tribal Sovereignty and Tribal Nations.” Resonating with the missions and visions, US interviewees—both content area experts (CAEs) and administrators treat tribal nation building as a critical reason why TCUs were established.

Maybe the most important single reason why tribal colleges were started was by people who believed they should work to strengthen their tribal nations, to ensure the survival and growth of their tribal nations as separate and distinct nations, including culturally distinct and politically distinct, with their own governments. And they needed an educational system that would strengthen their nations politically, economically, socially, and culturally. They would remain as separate nations. So, while you can give a variety of practical educational arguments for why students should go to a tribal college, in my research in many years taking part in the movement, I think it’s very clear that people who started the colleges were mostly looking to assure the survival of their own communities, not just educational opportunities for individual students. (CAE12)

TCUs have served as the medium to integrate the desire of tribal nation building into the educational programs and social and economic development.

We call it nation building, which is all those characteristics of our tribal nations that make them. Tribal colleges emerged under that desire [of nation building] for our education that was culturally-relevant; and also, in [the building of] our communities’ and somebody’s socio-economic powers,

there is a part of that [desire]. So, they respond to try to train people for jobs and create jobs. (CAE07)

TCUs promote tribal nation building in the three primary ways. First, TCUs cultivate Indian self-awareness. As the mission of Fort Peck Community College (FPCC 2018) notes, “FPCC serves the people of the Fort Peck Reservation and northeastern Montana as a medium of Indian awareness enabling increased self-awareness.” The premise of nation building is the self-determination of tribal nations, or to “take the Native Americans out of the hand of the federal government” (CAE02). In this sense, before providing HE opportunities, TCUs cultivate their tribal members with Indian self-awareness; and because of the dedication to their Indian identity, after receiving education or professional training, tribal members are giving back to the building of their tribes. “We serve our reservation and surrounding communities as a medium of Indian awareness, which enables Indian self-awareness” (TCU01). This interdependent connection between TCUs and tribes highlights the role that TCUs play in tribal nation building.

Second, TCUs realize the belief that AIANs can become self-reliant on themselves by providing HE that is relevant to their cultures, traditions, and needs.

The reason why tribal colleges were organized was that there is a belief that they can depend on themselves and they can educate themselves to do a good job of preparing to develop their foundation and to prepare Indian students not just on the academic side, but also to help them develop some of the motivation and purposes of going to school. (CAE11)

Third, TCUs cultivate human resources and leaders who will contribute their talents and skills to the building of their respective tribal nations. For example, one of the strategic goals of the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (2018) is to “expand its role in tribal nation-building by better understanding and responding to the educational and workforce needs of tribes, and to better support the sustainability of tribes’ fundamental needs.” Interviewees also highlighted the connection between TCU students and their tribes.

Somehow, in the end, [Indian students will] understand and realize there is a connection between what [direction] their life will go and what their life

as an educator or profession is to be and help them tie that back to the development of their tribal nations. Some belong to this way, and they can be seen as a change agent to fill some gap that exists within their tribes. Someday, we would like them to come back and serve as a leader. (CAE11)

In conclusion, tribal nation building is the most crucial role TCUs play because they are cultivating Indian self-awareness of tribal members, realizing the pursuit of educational self-determination, and preparing human resources for the tribal social and economic development.

5.1.2 Providing Culturally Relevant Higher Education

As one of the dual missions of TCUs, providing access to HE is included in all TCUs' mission statements. Because to some extent, the mainstream higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States fail in ensuring access and attainment success for AIANs. Therefore, TCUs have been an important alternative for AIANs in their HE pursuits. Also, most TCUs are community colleges with relatively low tuition rates, which guarantees an openness to tribal communities, non-traditional students, as well as non-native students on or near their reservations. "It is also the intent [of TCUs] to provide easy access to affordable college programs, and in most colleges, to provide educational leadership to their tribes, communities, and elementary and secondary schools on or near their respective reservations" (CAE13).

For all 38 TCUs in the United States, even though most are community colleges, some of them have been accredited with qualifications to grant bachelor's and even master's degrees. Regarding the forms of education offerings, TCUs cover academic, vocational, and technical education. In addition, they also serve as a bridge for AIAN students to enter mainstream four-year institutions. Many TCUs also emphasize that they promote and provide resources for lifelong learning for their students and communities. "Students try to be trained in certain things in order to be employed by the tribe or other organizations in the tribal community. These opportunities are available to them. They can take these programs through not only vocational training but also through academic training in the first two years [at a TCU] and then they can go on to [complete their undergraduate/graduate schooling at] a mainstream institution" (CAE09).

In the mission and vision statements of TCUs, the words “quality” and “excellent” have appeared the most times to describe the HE provided by them. However, in the interviews, many participants used the phrase “culturally relevant” to describe what type of HE TCUs offer. Culturally relevant HE emphasizes the creation of “a learning environment that perpetuates and strengthens [tribal] culture, language, values, and traditions” (TCU04), as well as the application of cultural ways of knowing and research in education. Also, culturally relevant HE considers the tribal traditions in the delivery of educational programs, which makes TCUs different from mainstream HEIs in the United States.

[M]any academic policies did fail. Some of the things would be at odds with the culture I tell. For example, academic probation and suspension. In regular colleges, you go to school per semester and if you do not do good, you can get put on probation. You can be really bad in the next semester, and you can be suspended, and you have this type of set up. I do not think it is a tribal philosophy. I do not think they would kick people to the curb like that. (CAE06)

In conclusion, TCUs have played a significant role in providing easily accessed, affordable, and perhaps most importantly, culturally relevant postsecondary education, including academic, vocational, and lifelong learning programs to AIANs living on or near the reservations.

5.1.3 *Preserving Native Cultures and Languages*

The preservation of tribal cultures, languages, traditions, and values is the second part of the dual missions of TCUs. “The other mission is to maintain the tribal cultures, languages, heritages, and the variety of education” (CAE02). It is also reflected in the mission and vision statements of TCUs. For instance, Little Big Horn College (2018) is “committed to the preservation, perpetuation and protection of Crow culture and language, and respects the distinct bilingual and bi-cultural aspects of the Crow Indian Community.”

Some interviewees sensed the dangers that their tribal culture and heritage are facing because the education provided by mainstream HEIs does not consider cultural aspects of indigenous peoples. Interviewees also believed that TCUs should take the responsibility to maintain their cultures, heritages, languages, and values.

Another reason is that the education that tribal members were exposed to did not take into consideration the unique cultural aspects of the tribal members. Therefore, Turtle Mountain Community College was established to help preserve and teach the tribal language, cultural history, and appropriate ceremonies. We want to engage what we expect to revitalize in the educational round. (CAE15)

To fulfill the role of preserving tribal cultures and languages, in addition to setting up programs and majors in tribal cultures and languages, TCUs “incorporate all the culture, languages, and ceremonies into ... the program structures. [They] just reinforce the culture and keep the language alive” (TCU07). Moreover, some TCUs are putting more effort to save a particular heritage in their cultures.

We are losing a lot of our medicine people—the traditional healers. We are losing a lot of them. There is a lot of Indian leaders that believe we can help sustain that if we do something at the tribal college level to bring some traditional medicine healers to our classes. They still exist today. We can bring some of those people to our college and have them talk to some students who would become their apprentices. Several colleges have this program, and they considered part of the Traditional Medicine Men Association. (CAE11)

In the interviews, when participants were talking about tribal cultures and languages, most of them used the verbs “preserve,” “maintain,” “revitalize,” “emphasize,” and “strengthen.” Only one interviewee used the word “promote” (TCU06) with the meaning as to “advertise” or “spread.” This phenomenon, to some extent, reflects that the main task of TCUs in culture preservation emphasizes the need to sustain and vitalize indigenous languages and cultures instead of promoting them to mainstream society and international contexts. It is also reflected in the mission statements of 38 TCUs, of which 4 include the word “promote” or “promotion.”

5.1.4 *Serving Tribal Communities*

Compared to the role of tribal nation building, which is at more of a political and philosophical level, serving tribal communities is the down-to-earth role TCUs play. TCUs often realize their missions in community service through implementing their place-based and needs-based strategies.

First, TCUs take advantage of their strategic locations on reservations to serve their respective tribal communities and nearby populations who are not able to afford to attend mainstream four-year HEIs or who do not want to leave their hometown and travel far to other cities. “I think the role tribal colleges play is that they create very unique institutions that are mostly place-based institutions serving the very disfranchised population that have strong cultures and identities but who suffer a lot of socioeconomic ills” (CAE02). In addition to students, TCUs serve the whole community. “As part of our mission, we provide part of the community services. We not only work with elders, but we also work with the children, the youth, and our local government. We provide services to [the entire] community” (TCU05).

Second, most TCUs are characterized as needs-based institutions that serve their tribes in meeting their most urgent needs. In general, TCUs are treated as institutional resources to best meet the needs of tribal development. “In any area that is identified, tribal colleges should play the role of being a resource to development of whatever in education, economic development, natural resources, and health. In all these areas, TCUs should fulfill some roles of being a resource” (CAE11). Also, TCUs offer programs and studies that will lead to employment opportunities based on local needs. In specific, TCUs offer degree programs to develop “a well-educated and trained workforce who meet the human resource needs” (TCU04). For instance, “tribal colleges offered degree programs that were relevant to the needs of the communities they served. For example, a college in Montana started a program in Forestry. Why? Because there was a need for tribal members with knowledge about forestry to the jobs available for them” (CAE12). TCUs also help create employment opportunities based on tribal needs and prepare leaders for the improvement of the tribal management level.

5.2 ROLES OF ETHNIC MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

Within the centralized HE system in China, the establishment and operation of EMSIs are closely related to the national educational policies, as well as political, economic, and development policies. In the 1950s, the first group of Ethnic Minority Colleges and Universities (EMCUs) were established as specialized training schools to cultivate EM political leaders in ethnic areas. After the late 1970s, EMCUs transformed to regular HEIs but kept their special missions of serving EM students and geographic

areas. Meanwhile, HEIs in EM areas joined in the EMSIs family to serve the same purpose. In this sense, EMSIs play both roles as regular HEIs and ethnic institutions.

Regarding the missions of EMSIs, the Chinese government proposed “Three Centers, One Window,” which means “EMSIs should serve as the center of cultivating high-quality ethnic talents, the center of conducting research on ethnic theories and policies, and the center of preserving and promoting excellent ethnic cultures, as well as serve as the window of displaying Chinese ethnic policies and strengthening international cooperation” (EMI05). Resonated to this national initiative, interviewees of EMSIs stated their roles as a promoter in the following aspects: ethnic talent training, ethnic research, ethnic culture preservation, and internationalization. Moreover, interviewees also emphasized the role of EMSIs in community service. In 2012, China’s Ministry of Education regulated that all HEIs must standardize and publish their charters, which provides the chance to go through the missions of most of the EMSIs in China. The text analysis of the charters has been applied as a means of triangulating the interview data.

5.2.1 *Ethnic Talent Training*

Ethnic talent training has been the principal mission of EMSI since its foundation in the early 1950s. However, the objectives of talent training have shifted away from cultivating EM political leaders in ethnic areas in recent years to training professionals for the economic development of ethnic areas, as well as the whole country.

Soon after its foundation, the People’s Republic of China established the Ethnic Minority colleges to serve the ethnic autonomous regions and to address ethnic issues. Therefore, these institutions have attached great importance to the study of ethnic issues and are dedicated to the training of ethnic talents, exceptionally high-quality ethnic political officials and leaders. After the Reform and Opening-Up Policy in the late 1970s, economic development has become the central task in the ethnic areas. Ethnic institutions have further developed into multi-disciplinary and regular higher education institutions with ethnic characteristics. They focus on serving the implementation of the Develop-the-West Strategy by cultivating ethnic talents in economic, trade, law, and technology. (EMI03)

EMSIs have been treated as a particular type of HEI in China because of the unique role they play in serving EM populations and areas. “The positioning of Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions was derived from the perception of national education authorities on the principle and task of ethnic institutions, which is to serve Ethnic Minority population and communities” (EMI05). However, with the expansion and massification of HE in China, EMSIs have transitioned to become regular HEIs but with the ethnic characteristics. Therefore, the role of EMSIs in promoting ethnic talent training is to serve as a venue for providing equal HE opportunities to EM students instead of focusing exclusively on the training of ethnic elites.

Influenced by national policies that emphasize ethnic areas will benefit from ethnic talent training, most interviewees talked about the roles EMSIs play in ethnic talent training from the perspective of the ethnic areas instead of ethnic students. Only two interviewees provided information from the point of ethnic students, who view EMSIs as institutions which “help them adapt to mainstream society and enjoy equal benefits of social and economic development” (CAE05). One interviewee added that through EMSIs, ethnic students can have the equal opportunities to compete with the majority Han students in the education context and the workforce: “I think the mission of ethnic institutions for serving Ethnic Minorities in China is to allow ethnic students to have the opportunity to compete with Han students on the same level” (CAE03).

5.2.2 *Ethnic Research*

EMSIs play a role in ethnic research in two main aspects. One is research on ethnic theories, including ethnic histories, languages, literature, anthropology, and so on; the other is research on Chinese ethnic policies. “Regarding scientific research, ... [students and faculty at] Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions study Chinese Ethnic Minority issues, [conduct research] on ethnic oral and written languages, histories and cultures, and societies and economics, and organize and lead the editing and translation work of ethnic literature and folklore” (EMI03).

To play a role in promoting ethnic research, EMSIs have established programs and majors in ethnic studies. These programs have been valued as important venues of ethnic research generation. “Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions are conducting ethnic research through programs on ethnic society, culture, economy, etcetera, which greatly contribute to the

political stability and economic development of Chinese Ethnic Minority areas” (CAE04). Meanwhile, ethnic study programs as an important component of ethnic characteristics have been an advantage of EMSIs to distinguish them from China’s regular HEIs. “In my university, disciplines in Ethnic Minority education, culture, religion, and related ethnic studies have advantages [compared to the regular HEIs]. Therefore, many other institutions in Xinjiang focus on developing their programs in ethnic studies” (EMI06).

In addition to academic programs in ethnic studies, EMSIs have also established research centers covering various ethnic topics. These centers continue to serve as another important venue for ethnic research. “In addition to ethnic talent training, we have also done a lot in ethnic research, which has greatly contributed to the theoretical development of ethnic studies. We have many research centers, such as the Center for Ethnic Progress and the Center for Ethnic Studies, and research projects focusing on studies of ethnic theories and policies, as well as on the research of application” (EMI01).

5.2.3 *Cultural Preservation*

Ethnic culture preservation, as a special mission for EMSIs, is a unique characteristic differentiating them from the regular HEIs. “Not only ethnic institutions but also regular higher education institutions contribute to ethnic talent training. Therefore, ethnic talent training cannot totally present the uniqueness of ethnic institutions. It is the cultural preservation and innovation that can present their unique characteristic compared to regular HEIs” (CAE16). In the ethnic culture preservation, EMSIs benefit from the multi-ethnic situation in China, which promotes ethnic and cultural diversity and harmony. “Because [Yunnan] is an area where several Ethnic Minority groups live together, we always hold the idea of promoting multi-cultural education and cultivating trans-cultural talents. This idea is the basic principle of talent training in my university” (EMI02).

One ultimate goal of culture preservation at EMSIs is to “cultivate Ethnic Minority students to be participants and agents of inheritance and change of their ethnic cultures” (EMI01). To realize this goal, EMSIs should create an enabling environment that “treasures ethnic culture, as well as promotes the harmonious co-existence of ethnic and mainstream cultures.... Meanwhile, ethnic institutions should learn from ethnic ways

of education, and moreover, integrate these ways into the current educational system” (EMI01).

EMSIs serve the role of cultural preservation through setting up ethnic study programs for ethnic and non-ethnic students, including on the topics of ethnic culture, language, art, philosophy, and so on. Many interviewees recognized the importance of ethnic study programs at EMSIs because of the negative influences of the Chinese market-driven economy in the preservation of ethnic cultures, and especially on ethnic languages.

Ethnic study programs like ethnic language are marginalized in higher education disciplines, and their development mainly relies on Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions. Without these institutions, majors in ethnic languages and cultures—such as Turkic, Miao-Yao, and Kazakh languages—will be wiped out by the market-driven economy. [Unfortunately,] only a few students want to enter these programs. (CAE04)

At last, in addition to merely preserving ethnic cultures, some interviewees proposed that cultural innovation is an important aspect to help ethnic cultures survive and flourish. “Ethnic culture preservation does not mean to preserve everything from a specific ethnic culture but to selectively preserve the excellent parts based on the needs and trends of the current times. Because some of the cultures cannot follow the trends of the current times, ethnic institutions need to change and improve them innovatively” (CAE05).

5.2.4 *Internationalization*

The internationalization of HE remains a prevailing trend in China, and Chinese educational authorities have expressed that internationalization should be the fourth function of HEIs besides talent training, scientific research, and social service. This trend has dramatically influenced EMSIs. Moreover, the geographic locations of many EMSIs along the border provinces position them with strategic geographic proximity and geopolitical value in international contexts.

EMSIs play an important role in the promotion of internationalization in two aspects—institutions and students. From the institutional perspective, EMSIs are “a window to display Chinese ethnic policies and strengthen international cooperation” (EMI05), especially in the context of the current Chinese foreign policy of the Belt and Road Initiative.¹

“With the development of globalization, as well as the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions have to strengthen their roles in internationalization, especially when it comes to international exchange and cooperation with our neighboring countries” (EMI03).

For students, EMSIs play an important role to help ethnic and non-ethnic students become global citizens with a global vision and a comprehensive understanding of global issues. “After the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, EMSIs in China are faced with a much more globalized world than existed before; therefore, they need to complete the mission of internationalization to [cultivate their students] with the quality of multicultural and international understanding” (CEA05).

NOTE

1. The Belt and Road Initiative is short for the Chinese government initiative of The Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty First Century Maritime Silk Road, which is a development strategy focusing on connectivity and cooperation between Eurasian countries, including China, the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and the ocean-going Maritime Silk Road.

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