



Challenges in Serving Indigenous/Ethnic Minority Peoples

This chapter covers the themes regarding the current challenges faced by TCUs and EMSIs in their development and realization of their missions. Some facilitating factors for TCUs and EMSIs are also considered challenges for them when examined from a different perspective. Given the same analysis technique of the facilitating factors, the author examined both internal and external challenges facing each type of institution. The external challenges in many ways create a hindering environment for TCUs and EMSIs to develop and realize their missions, while the internal challenges are the aspects that TCUs and EMSIs need to improve in their institutional operation, program delivery, and culture and language preservation.

7.1 CHALLENGES FACED BY TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The external challenges faced by TCUs include unstable funding sources, tribal politics, and the remoteness of the tribal communities. The internal challenges hindering TCUs to develop are varied because of the specific situations of each institution. However, there are still some common challenges faced by TCUs emerging from the conversations in the interviews. They are the student readiness and enrollment, the lack of qualified

faculty, the lack of sufficient facilities and infrastructure, and other barriers to cultural preservation.

7.1.1 *External Challenges*

7.1.1.1 *Unstable Funding Sources*

Almost all interviewees argued that the unstable funding situation is the biggest challenge currently facing TCUs. While the available funding sources were vital for the establishment of TCUs in the early days and their current development, the unstable status of funding has been a big challenge for them, especially in the creation of new programs needed by their students and communities. “The funding is a big issue. [TCUs] are poorly funded, which means they cannot pay a lot to their faculty. That creates problems. Some buildings are less than ideal. So, funding is a major issue” (CAE10). In specific, the uncertain status of funding stems from the unguaranteed federal funding, the lack of tax-based funding, and the increased number of non-native students.

Based on the *Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act*, TCUs can receive \$8000 per AIAN student headcount each year; however, “the preferential funding from the federal government cannot always be guaranteed” (CAE02). Moreover, in some tribes, there is no tax base, which means the tribal government cannot use tax money to fund TCUs. Therefore, TCUs have to depend almost exclusively on federal appropriations. This situation worsens when federal funding becomes unpredictable.

Our institutions are almost entirely dependent upon federal appropriations or federal money. These reservations have no tax base, so as a result, they do not have any way of generating local revenues to support the function of government and education. Therefore, there are no local funds for tribal governments to allocate to tribal colleges. In some cases, there is some money but not much money. The bottom line is that tribal colleges are almost totally dependent on federal funding, which is never adequate to totally support the mission of the institution. Funding is always a problem. (CAE15)

In addition, increased student enrollment, especially of non-native students, makes the financial burden heavier for TCUs. “There are increasing numbers of White students studying at TCUs, but they cannot receive the

Federal preferential funding, which has brought more financial burden for TCUs” (CAE02). When TCUs turn to other financial sources for help, their small-scale contributions become a limitation. “Most TCUs are two-year community colleges, which are on a small scale, so it is hard for TCUs to convey their values to funding providers” (CAE02).

7.1.1.2 Tribal Politics

Even though TCUs are owned and operated by AIAN tribes, not all of them can have equal support from their respective governments and communities. First, the unstable tribal leadership and the limited administrative ability of the tribal government can hinder the development of TCUs.

Another challenge is the administrative ability. This depends on the college and not all colleges face this challenge. However, the political environment within the tribal nation can be a little unstable. Tribal chairmen come and go very quickly. There are many politics [that exist] in tribes. Sometimes, presidents are hired, and they get fired. That can lessen the stability and growth of the tribal colleges. (CAE12)

Tribal members’ general negative perceptions of HE is another challenge for TCUs, which is often influenced by tribal politics. The struggle for community support used to be a major challenge for the early TCUs, and now the general situation has gradually become better. However, some interviewees still treated it as an external challenge for some TCUs.

I think nobody is publicly saying that tribal colleges are not legitimate institutions of higher learning. But I also think there are always, even now, to a small degree, people who think tribal colleges are not quite as good as mainstream colleges. That would be a small challenge. That is not as big of a challenge now, but it was certainly [a big challenge] in the early days. (CAE12)

Not all TCUs can enjoy the privilege of being fully supported by their tribal government. The unstable leadership or the limited administrative ability of some tribal governments hinders the development of their tribal colleges. Moreover, some TCUs still need to struggle for the support of their tribal members.

7.1.1.3 *Remote Location*

As indicated by several interviewees, the remoteness of the AIAN reservations and communities is another external challenge for TCUs. Some TCUs are located in very rural and remote areas of the United States. “For the severe extreme rurality, which is what the USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] uses, about half of our students live under the condition of the extreme rurality. They are living in the country. These are the conditions we worked with from the very beginning of our institution” (TCU02). The remoteness or isolation makes transportation to and from TCU campuses a problem for students, faculty, and staff members. “One of the challenges is the nature of the land space. The Tohono O’odham Nation has 2.8 million acres. People are living in 56 different communities in 11 different districts. Each district is often quite remote. That always influences the enrollment” (TCU06). The poverty of the community worsens this situation because the tribe cannot provide sufficient public transportation financial support for all students. “Some of the tribal colleges are located in the poorest areas in America, they are in rural and isolated locations. Sometimes, the only way into and out of the reservation is the highway. There is no rail system, no bus line, no airport, and such things. Isolation is another challenge that people face in tribal colleges” (CAE15).

7.1.2 *Internal Challenges*

7.1.2.1 *Student Readiness and Enrollment*

Interviewees indicated student readiness as one of the severest internal challenges for TCUs. As most TCUs are community colleges, they are open to the whole community, and therefore, a significant part of their students are non-traditional college students.

At tribal colleges ... they are dealing with non-traditional students. Some of the non-traditional Native American students will take the class for one quarter, but someday they will step out. They say “I have to step out to take care of my home and I will come back for quarter two.” At community colleges, if everything goes well, students should be able to finish everything within two years. However, for non-traditional Native American students, it can be more, like three, four, or even five years to get an associate degree. That would be the biggest factor that is non-traditional students—like single parents or both parents with kids and a job—those kinds of elements

make it difficult for them to progress through that [traditional HE] pipeline. (CAE14)

Meanwhile, many TCU students have never received basic education before entering college. This situation makes the student readiness a big challenge for TCUs to conquer. “Students coming into the institutions are not always coming out of the K-12 system and [are not always] academically prepared for college-level rigor. They need special help to get through” (CAE02). And indicated by three TCU administrators’ responses, 75 to 90 percent of their freshman students need some type of remedial education. Therefore, TCUs usually have to devote a big portion of their budget to developmental and remedial education programs.

Our students coming from high school have many needs regarding developmental education. Just between 10 and 25 percent of our entering freshman class, varying from year-to-year, are ready for the college curriculum. I did talk about developmental education, but not the number of students who need our developmental work, which is one of our big challenges. Devoting our resources to developmental education is one of our challenges. While we devote our resources to the programs and development, we always devote a serious percentage of our courses to the developmental coursework. (TCU02)

In addition to the student readiness for a college education, student enrollment is another big challenge for TCUs. Even though TCUs are mainly serving AIAN students, they cannot take it for granted that native students will autonomously choose them. Interviewees argued two reasons for the issue of student enrollment. The first reason is the competition for students from prestigious universities around the country and other community colleges around the reservations.

These kids that graduated at the top usually are those who will be successful wherever they go. Naturally gifted kids will succeed wherever they go. I know tribal colleges would love to have those kids, but those kids end up going elsewhere. That is a challenge you need to overcome.... That is a battle that tribal colleges need to be ready to find a way to equal their share of obtaining these students. (CAE11)

The second reason is the social problems that hinder students from being able to enter TCUs, especially alcoholism and drug abuse on some tribal reservations.

To be honest with you, it is a social problem. It is drugs that make the major barrier for our students coming to school. If they come, they are not always able to be focused. We are having very serious drug issues here. Many communities have one of these issues, and we have. Our reservation is such a closed community that most people do not leave the reservation. It becomes a multi-generational issue as alcohol and unemployment. We have serious issues here, and we are struggling to try to keep our enrollment up. In the last probably four or five years, our enrollment was down by 75 to 100 students, which you are looking at could be our operational money. (TCU05)

In conclusion, TCUs need to put a big part of their already-insufficient financial sources to build the developmental (or remedial) education programs, which is a big challenge for them in the harsh financial conditions. Additionally, TCUs are battling with other HEIs for the enrollment of students, especially for the top graduates of high schools, while some social issues further decrease the number of their enrollments.

7.1.2.2 Lack of Qualified Faculty

The lack of qualified faculty is another major internal challenge for TCUs because it is directly related to the quality of the education they provide. Furthermore, the most-qualified native faculty members bear the responsibility of preserving their tribal cultures and values. “When we look at the list of faculty members, you do not see too many faculty members with PhDs or doctoral degrees, or advanced degrees in general. You will see quite a few at the master’s degree level. You might see [some with] only bachelor-level [credentials]. I think all tribal colleges have that challenge. You will also see a large number of non-Indian faculty teach in these roles” (CAE11).

The challenges of the lack of qualified faculty are primarily manifested in the recruitment and retention of TCU faculty members, as well as the decrease of native faculty. First, because of the remoteness and poverty of the rural areas and the relatively low salaries, not many qualified faculty candidates are willing to teach at TCUs or stay long after they choose to come. “Tribal colleges are small and poor, and in rural locations. It can be hard to recruit faculty in that context. They do not pay well, they do not

have tenure, and they cannot provide the research opportunities, or the opportunities of collaboration with faculty” (CAE12). To address this challenge, some TCUs put the effort into cultivating their own faculty team. However, the cultivation of new faculty members familiar with the tribal cultures and philosophies becomes another challenge for some TCUs, especially when their native faculty members are getting older.

One of the challenges...is that we have faculty who are getting older, so when new faculty come in, how do we ensure that the next group of faculty would have an understanding of the way of our people? We have faculty members that are very traditional and old. How do we have them transfer their knowledge? How do we facilitate that? ... How will it go from our elders to the young people that come out of universities with PhDs? How do we transfer that knowledge just like transferring knowledge from the grandfather to the grandson? Those are the challenges we are having. (TCU03)

The challenges TCUs face about faculty include not only how to recruit and maintain qualified faculty members, but also the cultivation of new faculty members who understand the tribal cultures and ways of knowing and learning.

7.1.2.3 *Lack of Facilities*

Because of the lack of sufficient funding, some TCUs also face the challenge of the lack of sufficient facilities. Many TCUs are still using the old facilities since their foundation, but they have no capacity to upgrade them. With the growth of enrollment, their current facilities cannot always meet institutional development needs. “We are growing so quickly and have to work out some of our plans [to meet the needs of our stakeholders]. We have to expand our campus to provide additional square footage for classrooms, faculty offices, and auxiliary services. The things we need are related to our financial budgeting resources” (TCU01).

Also, the old facilities have become a barrier to the recruitment of new faculty members. “There is not a lot of infrastructure in their communities devoted to tribal colleges. So, for example, it is hard to recruit people to come to teach in your colleges because you do not have housing for them. They might have to drive great distances in order to teach at your institution” (CAE07).

At last, because of the remoteness and poverty, the lack of technical facilities is another challenge for some TCUs to develop online education programs. “The other big challenge we have is dealing with technology. Because of our remoteness, we have the challenge of having enough bandwidth to provide the type of education that is needed in today’s world. That is a big challenge for us” (TCU03). The lack of sufficient and up-to-date facilities have become an obstacle for some TCUs to recruit faculty members and provide online education programs. In general, the lack of facilities limits the development of some TCUs.

7.1.2.4 Barriers to Culture Preservation

As interviewees argued, TCUs face two major challenges in the realization of their mission of preserving their tribal cultures. First, most TCUs operate like community colleges, but from a HE institutional perspective, the organizational structure of TCUs is not optimally efficient and geared toward preserving indigenous cultures. Meanwhile, the HE-related organizations that TCUs partner with generally lack the necessary understanding of the tribal cultures.

The other [challenging] thing is that tribal colleges or these educational institutions in our organizational structures are not inherently natural to tribes. We are not inherently hierarchical in our structures. We are very much a value-based people, and bureaucracy and organizations that we work with like the accrediting bodies, they are not operated by humanistic and holistic native people, and we sometimes find it a challenge to work in those environments. (CAE07)

Second, while it is vital for TCUs to get accredited as HEIs, accreditation requirements are additional challenges for TCUs to preserve their cultures. This is because most HE accrediting bodies have not recognized tribal cultures and traditions as part of the accrediting process.

One of the major problems is the tribal colleges want to have their culture, language, and regional definition throughout all of the work they do, but also, they want to be a higher education institution. In order to do that, they have to be accredited. In order to get funded, they have to be accredited. In order for their students to be eligible for the workforce, [they have to be accredited]. So, they can’t really be an institution of higher education that just delivers cultural values because they still have the same rules and

regulations as higher education institutions everywhere. Therefore, trying to accomplish these two things together is really difficult. (CAE06)

The reason TCUs face persistent challenges about cultural preservation is primarily that their tribal cultures are not well-integrated into or aligned with the organizational structure of TCUs. Furthermore, tribal cultures are not well recognized by other HE organizations, especially the accreditation bodies when they formulate the criteria of accreditation.

7.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY ETHNIC MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

The external challenges faced by EMSIs to realize their missions include those related to policies and the marginalized position of EMSIs in the Chinese HE system. From the internal perspective of EMSIs, the primary challenge for them is how to improve their ethnic programs. Also, EMSIs are facing the internal challenges caused by the multi-level administration and the traditional organization structure, inadequate support for student successes, and faculty turnover.

7.2.1 *External Challenges*

7.2.1.1 *Challenges Related to Policies*

Even though the regional ethnic autonomy system and preferential HE policies for CEM students have created a favorable policy environment for EMSIs, they are still facing some challenges related to policies. Some of these challenges are for the whole group of EMSIs, while some are mainly for a specific group of EMSIs based on their geographic locations.

First, the major challenge related to the policies faced by all EMSIs is the controversial perception against the preferential HE policies for EM students. Meanwhile, Chinese society cannot fully recognize the values of EMSIs.

There is a backlash against what is seen as preferential policies for minorities because some people do not think it is fair. They say Ethnic Minorities are getting special treatment, and some people do not think that is fair. On the other hand, the Ethnic Minority groups are still under-represented in higher

education, so there has to be a way to encourage Ethnic Minorities or to provide opportunities for them in higher education. That is one challenge. (CAE01)

This controversial perception of EM policies is derived from a superficial understanding, and sometimes a misunderstanding of CEMs and EMSIs. “Some people do not understand the complexity of Chinese Ethnic Minority issues.... [They think] Ethnic Minority students receive special treatment because they are not as good as Han students. This is a misunderstanding” (CAE04). Regarding the perception of EMSIs, some people in the field of HE think ethnic institutions are created because of the CEM policies, so their most important and only task is to realize the policy mission on serving EMs and keeping ethnic unity. Some interviewees pointed out that this perception has negatively influenced EMSIs in self-positioning and receiving support from the central and local governments.

[Based on the wrong perception of Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions,] in the institutional positioning, they only need to keep the primary function of providing higher education access to Ethnic Minorities and guarantee ethnic equality. The development of other disciplines is the task of regular higher education institutions. Influenced by this perception, the policy, financial, and physical support will incline to the regular institutions. (EMI01)

Also, some interviewees mentioned that some of the new-emerging national policies related to the economy, development, and foreign affairs create a challenging environment for EMSIs. For example, as a foreign policy focus of China, the Belt and Road Initiative brings international competition to those EMSIs located within the border provinces. “We are locating in the Ethnic Minority areas and serving Ethnic Minorities, the Belt and Road Initiative will bring a challenge to the student enrollment of ethnic institutions located in the border provinces. For example, EMSIs in Yunnan Province need to face added competition from the good universities in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore” (CAE05).

Challenges related to policies for EMSIs include the controversial perceptions against the preferential policies for EMs and the misunderstanding of EMSIs as merely “policy-oriented” institutions. Moreover, new-emerging policies also challenge some EMSIs because of their geographic locations.

7.2.1.2 *Marginalized Position in the Higher Education System*

Even though the Chinese government has implemented a series of policies to facilitate the development of EMSIs, they are still in a marginalized position in the Chinese HE system. Their marginalized position is demonstrated by the fact that very few EMSIs are included in the list of the national prestigious HE projects and plans—*Project 211* and *Project 985*—and the current newly implemented *Double First Class University Plan*.¹ “In the national higher education strategy of developing key universities, Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions are basically excluded, or they can get minimal resources and policy support. This is relatively unfair.... Only two ethnic institutions and several disciplines of ethnic studies are included in the *Double First-Class University Plan*” (CAE05).

In addition, the marginalized position of EMSIs leads to the inadequacy of top ethnic institutions for EM students to choose. Therefore, it is highly competitive for EM students to enter the prestigious EMSIs, like Minzu University of China in Beijing.

Minzu University of China in Beijing is on the list of “211” and “985” so it receives more money from the government, which means that they can prioritize specific areas. However, there is also an adverse effect that it has become a competitive university, which means that many of the most disadvantaged students are not going to be able to meet the admission standards for that university. It is one of the challenges as a university that wants to provide opportunities for underserved Ethnic Minorities, but as it becomes more competitive, Ethnic Minority students are not able to enter that university. (CAE01)

At last, the marginalized position of EMSIs also makes their graduates in a disadvantageous situation in the competitive job market, which in turn influences EMs’ motivations to receive HE. “Some Ethnic Minority students have a negative attitude to receive higher education because of the disadvantageous situation in the job market after graduation. The fact that graduating from a college or university cannot ensure a job has become a negative factor that keeps weakening Ethnic Minority students’ motivations for receiving higher education” (EMI04).

7.2.2 *Internal Challenges*

7.2.2.1 *Ethnic Programs*

Ethnic programs, including ethnic languages, literature, art, and medicine, are essential for EMSIs to preserve ethnic cultures and to help EMs learn about their heritages in formal educational settings. Ethnic programs are also the primary factor that differentiates EMSIs from regular HEIs. However, as many interviewees argued, EMSIs face several challenges when creating and developing ethnic programs.

First, most ethnic programs using the ethnic languages as the medium of instruction are in the humanities and social sciences fields, and there is still no definite clue to incorporate ethnic languages into the natural science and engineering disciplines. This situation makes it hard for EMSIs to meet all the needs of EM students on discipline choices. “The engagement of ethnic languages and cultures varies in different disciplines, which is a barrier for ethnic institutions to realize their mission of preserving ethnic languages and cultures. Obviously, ethnic languages and cultures are more engaged in the traditional [humanity and social science] disciplines than that in the natural science and engineering disciplines” (CAE16).

In addition, in the current competitive job market, ethnic programs cannot ensure a promising career future for the vast majority of EM students after graduation.

If you are majoring in Uyghur language and literature, written language or history, there are not many jobs available. From a practical standpoint, in these days, more people would like to major in business, finance, and even English. That is true everywhere in the world not only in China. However, it makes it challenging to cultivate talents who are experts in the Ethnic Minority cultures because, in the market-driven economy, it is hard to place people into jobs which are not relevant to their conceptual nature. (CAE01)

Finally, an EMSI administrator mentioned the central government does not sufficiently consider EM students’ needs on developmental education in the curriculum design.

The course requirements for higher education students are the same in all Chinese universities and colleges. However, some Ethnic Minority students need to take some courses to strengthen their foundational knowledge basis.

But due to the tight policy, ethnic institutions have little flexibility to provide such [developmental] courses. It is impossible for [some] Ethnic Minority students to achieve a good educational performance [without taking these developmental courses and being prepared]. (EMI01)

Therefore, regarding the ethnic programs, EMSIs are faced with the challenge to consider EM students' needs in discipline choices, career development after graduation, and in developmental or remedial education circumstances.

7.2.2.2 Multi-level Administration and the Traditional Organization Structure

In the centralized HE system, generally speaking, EMSIs are administered by the government. However, EMSIs vary depending on their administrative structure. Many EMSIs are co-administrated by as many as three levels of educational authorities from the central government to the local governments. As was pointed out by some interviewees, while this multi-level administration structure can bring more support to EMSIs, it has the potential to cause challenges in the management of EMSIs. This is because all bodies need to put in significant efforts to make their responsibilities clear to each side.

The administrative structure of Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions is different from that of regular higher education institutions. The State Ethnic Affairs Commission of China directly administers several ethnic institutions. However, most ethnic institutions in the Ethnic Minority areas are under a three-level administration. They are co-built by one of the ministries or commissions, the provincial governments, and the municipal governments. This multi-level administration may bring a challenge to the development of Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions. (CAE05)

Also, within EMSIs, the organizational structure has kept the traditional university-school-department way for a long period. This traditional way lacks the flexibility of including the new-emerging research organizations and centers of ethnic studies, as well as integrating them into the organizational structure. "Currently, many academic and research centers emerge, but they cannot easily integrate into the university's organizational structure. A new structure needs to be developed by the University. We are still using the old way, which cannot meet the new needs" (EMI02).

7.2.2.3 *Inadequate Support for Student Success*

Benefiting from the national preferential HE policies, EMSIs have played an important role in providing HE access to EM students. However, some content area experts (CAEs) of Chinese ethnic HE argued that EMSIs need to improve their student support services, especially the service for EM students' success.

As far as I know, my general impression is that [Ethnic Minority] students have better opportunities to go to college. However, they have relatively fewer opportunities in school to be successful [in comparison with their Han student counterparts]. That does not mean they are unsuccessful; rather, it often means the necessary effort they must invest in order to be successful may be considerably higher than for Han students. (CAE03)

In specific, as argued by one EMSI administrator, one challenge for EMSIs to promote student success is how to provide comprehensive information to EM students even before they enter colleges or universities. For example, most of the EM students come from remote and rural areas, and they have limited access to information about the programs and majors provided by EMSIs. "Because of the limited conditions in transportation and telecommunication in Ethnic Minority areas, after entering the universities, many Ethnic Minority students do not really know what the majors are about, and what they can do after graduation" (EMI01).

7.2.2.4 *Faculty Turnover*

At EMSIs, an excellent faculty team plays a significant role in providing quality educational programs to EM students. However, because of the remote location and the poverty condition, it is a great challenge for most EMSIs to recruit and retain qualified faculty. "Ethnic Minority areas are usually in an economically underdeveloped condition; therefore, in the recruitment of university graduates as teachers, Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions cannot compete with the higher education institutions in the economically-developed areas, like Beijing" (EMI06).

Meanwhile, another challenge that EMSI faculty face is how to remain when other opportunities arise to go elsewhere. Additionally, how can EMSIs retain many of their top graduates as future faculty members? "The top graduates cultivated by ethnic institutions and their excellent faculty members are more inclined to develop their career in the Eastern coast. The loss of excellent faculty members with their research projects makes it

difficult for Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions to realize their mission in ethnic talent training” (CAE16).

NOTE

1. The Double First Class University Plan is a higher education plan implemented in 2015 by the Chinese government to create world-class universities and disciplines by the end of 2050.