

# BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

## CASE STUDIES OF BREAKING THROUGH TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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Tribal Colleges Breaking Through, a partnership of Jobs for the Future, the National Council for Workforce Education, and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, was an eighteen-month initiative focused on piloting workforce and education strategies to better serve low-skilled students at tribal colleges and universities. Six institutions participated—Comanche Nation College, Leech Lake Tribal College, Little Big Horn College, Northwest Indian College, Salish Kootenai College, and Sitting Bull College—with each establishing two or more cohorts of GED or workforce students and incorporating the four Breaking Through core strategies. The colleges also joined the national Breaking Through network of colleges and attended semiannual peer learning meetings designed to further promote effective approaches for academically underprepared students.

Data from the participating colleges suggest that Tribal Colleges Breaking Through has had a significant impact. TCBT institutions piloted Breaking Through with roughly 400 students and awarded more than 450 industry-recognized credentials and GEDs during the 18-month initiative. Most of the colleges reported improved student outcomes (e.g., college readiness, transitions to college, retention rates, credential attainment rates, and job placement) relative to their traditional, non-Breaking Through programs. Surveys and other qualitative data collection efforts tended to support improved student, faculty, and staff satisfaction as well.

As a result of experimenting with the implementation of Breaking Through in a tribal college context, a number of key themes emerged during the initiative:

**Peer Learning Network:** The six TCBT colleges met twice a year as part of their own peer learning community and integrated into the broader Breaking

Through network of community colleges across the country. This diverse group of colleagues, both experienced and new, enabled initiative staff to identify a wealth of strategies, resources, and expertise to enhance their Breaking Through projects. The end result was a much stronger approach than might ever have been developed by a single institution. Even now, many of the TCBT staff continue to work directly with one another as a result of this process.

**Alignment with Employer Demand:** The emphasis on workforce programs designed around employer demand, while not new to many of the colleges, was nevertheless a greater focus of TCBT than it was in most previous initiatives. A great deal of learning took place as a result. Colleges experimented with a number of related strategies, including contextualization, employability skill development, the use of labor market data, and stackable certificates.

The result was a deeper appreciation for linking local labor markets to college programs, with the goal of improving student retention, completion, and job placement rates.

**Senior Leadership Engagement:** In most Breaking Through colleges, the initiative is isolated in adult education or workforce departments that are removed from the regular college classes. In TCBT, there was a strong level of senior-level engagement. Presidents and chief academic officers attended national meetings, led the TCBT project personally, and interacted directly with students in their cohorts. This level of engagement allowed for a higher degree of institutionalization of the initiative, enabling the colleges to make the Breaking Through core strategies the norm and increasing the visibility on campus of low-skilled adult learners.

**Culturally Contextualized Instruction:** A useful strategy employed by many TCBT participants, and one that is specific to tribal colleges, was the employment of Native-American instructors with industry experience to culturally contextualize instruction. These individuals served as mentors and tutors and assisted students in the transition to working in non-tribal environments.

**Community Partnerships:** The TCBT colleges recognized that community partnerships had the potential to serve as the backbone of a number of strategies to support low-skilled adult learners. In some cases, this meant financial or in-kind service support, such as that provided by Tribal Employment Rights Offices, tribal or state Workforce Investment Act offices, TANF agencies, and state adult education providers. In other cases, it meant critical feedback for the college, including labor market information from workforce agencies on upcoming job openings and in-demand skills from regional employers.

Tribal Colleges Breaking Through was an extended pilot, but one that demonstrated convincingly that Breaking Through strategies and principles can be adapted to work at tribal colleges and universities. The three lead partner organizations hope to expand the initiative to serve a greater number of tribal colleges in the near future, and to use the extensive information gathered during the pilot stage to further refine the model so that it better serves Native-American students across the country.

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