

INDIGENOUS YOUTH LEADERSHIP: THEMES AND QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER



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California is the U.S. state with the third-largest population of self-identified Native Americans/Alaskans. Native American communities are growing within the country and are younger relative to the U.S. general population. At the same time, Native Americans are disproportionately likely to live in poverty, experience low educational attainment, lack employment, and suffer from poor health outcomes. Tribal communities' health issues are inextricably linked to the dispossession of their land, exposure to environmental contaminants, and the suppression of cultural practices. Given the history and harmful effects of settler colonialism, Native youth organizing is fundamentally intergenerational and connected directly to the issue of land and cultural revitalization.

This brief report highlights findings from interviews with five organizations that serve Native youth and are connected to the TCE-supported Youth Power Infrastructure. Four of these groups work directly with Indigenous or Native youth (True North, Redwood Voice of Wild Rivers Community Foundation, Youth Rising of Pollination Project, and California Native Vote Project), and the other is a philanthropic agency that supports programming for Native youth (Native Americans in Philanthropy). Here we highlight four key themes that emerged from interviews that can inform planning for future investments in youth organizing serving Native and Indigenous youth: (1) indigeneity as an inclusive definition of Native youth; (2) the significance of cultural revitalization; (3) geographic dispersion and digital infrastructure; and (4) the role of government agencies in providing an institutional footprint and recruitment platform. We conclude with questions to consider in thinking through future investments in youth organizing that target Native and Indigenous youth.

Indigeneity and the Inclusive Conceptualization of Native Youth

The staff of participating organizations define the term “Native” broadly and understand **indigeneity as a political and inclusive identity**. The reasons for adopting broad, inclusive definitions include histories of genocide, violent political repression, blood quantum requirements, and complex family lineages. As such, organizers were less concerned with tribal enrollment as a method of identifying potential participants than with providing opportunities for Indigenous youth to develop their indigeneity—including their specific tribal identity, Native American identity, or Indigenous identity—in ways that inspire leadership within their communities. Importantly, organizations have done some important work in building bridges across groups of youth with different Indigenous backgrounds. Yet additional resources are needed to continue building relationships within and across Indigenous and tribal nations.

At the same time, staff caution that in being inclusive of all Indigenous youth, Native youth may be underrepresented in organizations that do not explicitly recruit them. **It is therefore essential to create mechanisms that explicitly recruit and support Native American youth, both enrolled and self-identified**, while still allowing for a broad, inclusive Indigenous identity. Intentional efforts to recruit Native youth can leverage networks within Native communities and among youth themselves.

Cultural Revitalization

Cultural revitalization is an important element of Native youth organizing in Indigenous communities. It is about recovering cultural practices and dismantling the harm colonization inflicted on peoples, land, and culture. Indigenous peoples of what is now known as North America and South America have experienced violent histories of colonization and ongoing settler colonial erasure. This means that in addition to experiencing racialized structural and systematic marginalization, Indigenous peoples have also suffered intergenerational trauma as settler colonialism sought to strip Indigenous peoples of their languages, cultures, and land. Indigenous historical trauma is a concept developed by scientists to capture the collective impact of these histories on Indigenous health. While understanding the social impact on intergenerational trauma is important, understanding cultural revitalization—as an approach to combatting such trauma—is equally essential.

We have folks who are working in environmental justice. We have folks working in areas such as domestic violence, missing and murdered Indigenous women. We have folks who are just supporting the leadership of Native youth in general... I'll tell you that one common thing through every single grantee—every single grantee is focusing on some type of cultural revitalization, everyone. That's not our environment. That's what they are just doing, period. Whether that's in education, whether that's in environmental justice, reproductive justice, whatever area, it's all back to cultural connection, revitalization, and strengthening that understanding and knowledge for the Native youth.

– Gina Jackson, Native Americans in Philanthropy

Culture, Land, and Health. Native American cultural revitalization is about healing, is intergenerational, and is deeply tied to the land. The Wild Rivers organization, for example, explained that one of its goals was to support Yurok tribal efforts to access and tend to the land, specifically through prescribed burns. Prescribed burning is an activity that is fundamentally connected to the social, psychological, cultural, and spiritual well-being of the Yurok people and their traditional weaving of baby baskets, as burning helps to produce the shoots suitable for weaving. Thus, in this case, revitalizing the land extended to efforts to revitalize time-intensive cultural practices, as well. Cultivating and harvesting the materials for a woven basket takes years of ecological tending, a collective effort that is both multigenerational and intergenerational. As Michelle Jacob, Native feminist scholar on revitalization and decolonization, has explained, intergenerational healing resonates well with traditional Indigenous teachings that understand the interconnectedness among generations. Having the

opportunity to enact prescribed burns, the tribe's method of caretaking the land, meant that the community could partake in a practice that has been a part of their well-being for thousands of years.

Despite being one of the largest populations of Native Americans in the country, California's American Indian population has little tribal land. Given this situation, the emphasis on having access to land to carry out modes of living is sometimes difficult for funders to understand. From an Indigenous perspective, holistic health entails access to land and the ability to practice familial and community well-being. Alternatively, denying access to land and cultural activities is an extension of forced assimilation and genocide. Thus, supporting Native community members' access to land and cultural activities is a vital way of supporting community development, health, and healing.

Tribal Leadership, Resistance, and Civic Engagement. Settler-colonial expansion in the United States involved treaty-to-treaty relationships between tribal nations and colonial governments. Overwhelmingly, these treaties were meant to dispossess Native communities of their land. Similarly, Indian boarding schools were erected with the explicit purpose to erase Native cultures. Children were often stolen from their families and made to attend these institutions where their hair was cut, their tribal clothing exchanged for European garb, and speaking their own tribal languages was prohibited. Many were beaten, molested, and starved, and many died.

And yet, we cannot discount the agency of Native civic actors, and their ability to resist and survive. Treaty signatures were made often under duress, giving Native peoples little choice. Tribal leaders, under the threat of force, often signed treaty agreements to secure the survival of their community. Furthermore, in the case of Indian residential schools, the prevailing representations of Native experiences are not in fact monolithic. In the context of the assimilative and genocidal policies outlined above, many Native families sent their children to these schools in order for them to learn to read and write the English language. The attempt by families to school their children in the "white man's ways" was directly tied to their attempt to secure their community's survival.

Within this historical context, civic engagement can be linked to the history of tribal leaders who have sought to secure the well-being of future generations. From CNVP's perspective, participating in the electoral process is an extension of the work tribal elders enacted throughout history by engaging in systems that were perhaps not their own but nevertheless helped to secure space for successive generations. Civic engagement in this context is thus intergenerational, honoring both past and future generations through practices that secure community well-being.

We have to explain a little bit of history and the policies and the practices that were put out there by the federal government to exterminate us and to continue the genocide over peoples. And I just express that as a motivation or as a reminder to remember we weren't supposed to be here as Native peoples, just as even existing and being in the colonial higher education and succeeding and becoming lawyers and doctors and instructors and professors and organizers and whatever jobs that we do is something that is so beautiful and powerful and to be proud of... We've always struggled in different fights and overcoming a lot of obstacles... There were a lot of decisions that our tribal leaders, our ancestors, had to make that were tough, and maybe it was something that they really didn't want to do, but for the benefit of their people and for the survival of their people, they had to. Education, having to go to boarding schools, or signing a treaty, or being forced to do something else and trade land for money or something else... This is the sacrifice that I remember, and I remind people, "We need to remember that, too." We need more people doing this work, because if not, then we're just remaining silent, and we're complicit to the system that's just continuing to repress our people.

-Cheyenne, California Native Vote Project

Geographically Dispersed Communities and Digital Media

Native and Indigenous youth are geographically dispersed across the state and within urban and rural areas. Given this geographic dispersion, organizers identified a lack of transportation as a major hurdle for recruitment efforts, maintaining relationships, and for youth to attend networking and training opportunities outside of their organizations (e.g., regional retreats). For example, the Native Vote Project, which is based in Los Angeles County, shared that it is difficult even to meet with youth, let alone support the youths' organizing. It lacked the necessary resources to recruit and organize Native youth across Los Angeles County's densely populated 4,300 square miles. Such constraints are common to Native organizers. True North and Wild Rivers shared that they had difficulty organizing in remote areas. Wild Rivers explained that some areas take hours to reach, and that their task was made even harder because some families lacked power or cell service. Organizers noted that in such a context, getting youth involved depended on first fulfilling basic needs like transportation, food, and childcare.

Retreats. Retreats can be an essential mechanism in community building, capacity building, and self-care, particularly for a geographically dispersed community. An organizer from the Pollination Project suggested that retreats are crucial opportunities for holistic skill-building. The staff member differentiated retreats from more formal youth conferences; retreats were more holistic and vital because they produced a space for youth to develop their formal organizing skills while also tending to their spiritual, mental, and psychological well-being. Other organizations like True North expressed interest in seeking funding for similar programs to connect youth across the state at retreats. However, the interviews suggest that Native and Indigenous youth organizations have financially struggled to involve youth at the regional and statewide level. Consequently, Native youth and their organizations are missing out on TCE-supported opportunities to strengthen their identities as movement leaders, engage in broader level platforms, and cultivate well-being.

Digital Media. Digital media can facilitate connectivity among Native youth, but access to internet service can be a challenge, particularly for those residing in rural areas. All interviewed organizations use at least one social media platform to communicate to the public about their efforts, but when asked about social media strategies, their explanations for why, how, and to what extent they utilize social media varied. Native Vote Project, for example, uses apps to share youth organizing efforts, campaign updates, and internship opportunities; True North uses social media to communicate updates and share resources; and Pollination Project, noting that youth voices reported feeling drowned out on their platform, is looking for resources to hire a youth member to create a more intimate, local experience. Organizations also discussed their use of Zoom and other webinar platforms. Pollination Project hosts weekly webinars and a video training series, while Native Americans in Philanthropy also uses webinars to support Native non-profit organizations. Recently, Wild Rivers Community Foundation and Building Healthy Communities hosted a Zoom meeting to provide information for organizations hosting summer youth activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the organizations thus used technology to facilitate and maintain connections with their members.

Certain organizations also used social media in more targeted, strategic ways. Wild Rivers, for example, noted that local papers and media stations were not committed to telling community success stories, and therefore made a committed effort to promoting uplifting success stories on social media to push back against narratives of Native failure. Youth also took a leading role in some organizations. In addition to using social media to share information, the Redwood Voice youth organized around the issue of cyberbullying by drafting a social media policy recommendation for their school. Their school subsequently changed its social media policy based on the youth's recommendations. Supported by adult organizers, it was a win for the youth by the youth. Investing in digital media efforts, therefore, both supports community organizing and the development of individual youth's civic engagement skills.

However, significant barriers remain in terms of internet access, a problem heightened during the pandemic. During the recent Youth Power Assembly, the Save California Salmon youth activist Kylee Y. Sorrel succinctly highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on their organizing efforts to protect their river, fish, and tribal ways of life. As she explained, the tribe has effectively been barred access to conversations that affected their river and community because they cannot participate online. Tribes, she said, had limited or no access to these discussions, and as a result, government agencies were moving forward without their community's input. As waterways and tribal communities continue to be threatened, it will be important for philanthropic organizations interested in Native youth organizing and tribal health to learn from and support Save California Salmon efforts. These efforts in many cases depend on securing internet access.

Government Institutions and Institutional Footprints

Youth organizers made use of schools and other government service agencies as places "to plug in": to recruit members and access resources. All four organizations stated that they relied on or would use schools as recruiting and programming sites. Native Vote Project suggested universities and college campuses were useful places to find mentors willing to work with their

organization. True North and Wild Rivers both worked with youth at high schools, pointing out that schools provide convenient access to transportation and food services. As for government service agencies, Native Vote Project reported turning to non-profit and government organizations like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for logistical help. Dealing with already challenged infrastructures, organizers during the COVID-19 pandemic are going to need additional support with recruiting, programming, and maintaining their essential relationships with young people throughout this next year.

Questions to Consider when Supporting Native and Indigenous Youth Organizing

Based on the above themes, we propose the following questions for philanthropy and other stakeholders to consider when planning investments in Native and Indigenous youth organizing.

1. How are organizations centering Native and Indigenous conceptual framings of health? How can Native and Indigenous leaders be supported in promoting cultural revitalization as a strategy to guide youth organizing efforts?
2. What kinds of supports for in-person gatherings, digital infrastructure, and transportation can help youth organizations convene a geographically dispersed (enrolled and self-identified) Native youth population?
3. How can philanthropy play a role in recognizing and further motivating government agencies to provide institutional supports for Native youth programming?

We hope that this brief report offers useful insights for building on existing efforts seeking to build political power among California’s Native and Indigenous youth.

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