

## Framing Evaluation in Our Communities

American Indians and Alaskan Natives (AIAN) are reclaiming the education of our people through tribally-controlled colleges and universities and pre-K–12 schools and by working with educators in public schools that serve our children. Though we differ in our customs, languages, resources, and lands, we hold in common a commitment to maintain, restore, and preserve our values, wisdom and traditional pedagogies, and knowledge. Through curricula and programs designed to make learning more meaningful to tribal situations and cultures, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and programs in K–12 schools serving Indian students are working to reverse the history of devastating educational practices that sought to remove us from our culture and that have failed to effectively teach our children.

In this relatively new generation of creative ventures among TCUs and tribal and public schools, Indian educators are developing innovative approaches to curricula and implementing culturally appropriate and effective instructional methodologies. Many are incorporating cultural and place-based knowledge into the curriculum and exploring Indigenous pedagogy and instructional methods. Program evaluation can be an effective tool to capture and leverage this new knowledge. Yet, according to a 2003 survey of TCUs conducted by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), few teachers and faculty serving Indian students are trained in evaluation practice and many report a need for specific evaluation training (AIHEC survey, 2003). Reservation-based teachers and faculty have stated that they distrust the role of outside evaluators, worrying that evaluators are not trained to understand Indian country or the challenges faced by tribal programs. Not surprisingly, these educators feel little or no ownership of an evaluation process based on Western epistemology that ignores local culture and values.



Salish Kootenai College

*Indian educators are developing innovative approaches to curricula and instructional methodologies.*



# FRAMEWORK

Framing Evaluation in Our Communities

*Evaluation can provide powerful knowledge throughout Indian Country.*

Good evaluation practice, when properly understood, developed, and applied, can provide powerful knowledge throughout Indian Country. This will lead to:

- Immediate improvement in specific programs;
- A knowledge base of strategies and practices that, if shared widely, will provide a rich resource for educators seeking new and tested methods for improving Indian education; and
- Ultimately, more successful education programs throughout Indian Country, including increased participation and success in higher education, and stronger, healthier, and more prosperous tribal communities.

However, if evaluation is to help us achieve these goals, American Indians and Alaska Natives need to practice evaluation in ways that reflect our values and ways of knowing. We also need to implement evaluation practices that reflect our common values while respecting our cultural differences.



## Building the Framework

In the initial planning of this project, AIHEC recognized that the knowledge needed to guide an Indigenous approach to evaluation was grounded in tribal communities. Project staff asked more than 100 American Indian and Alaska Native elders and cultural experts, scientists, and educators to explore the ideas and goals of evaluation within the context of Indigenous ways of knowing about merit and worth. Much of this exploration took place in four one-day focus group discussions held in Tempe, AZ; Denver, CO; Seattle, WA; and Honolulu, HI.

In designing and implementing each of the focus groups, the project staff set the tone for bridging Western meeting formats with cultural traditions by using protocols appropriate to their own tribal practices. The meeting rooms were prepared by smudging with sweet grass to purify and clear the air. Prior to the discussion, each focus group participant was given an offering of tobacco as a token of respect for the wisdom that he or she was asked to share with us. Gifts of traditional foods from the cultures of the staff were also shared to thank participants for their contributions to the discussions. Although questions were developed to guide the focus groups, the discussion did not follow a linear question and answer format. Rather, the conversation flowed in a holistic manner as participants shared ideas and explored traditional values, described these values in their tribal languages, reflected on education, and discussed their views regarding evaluation.

Once the major elements of the Framework were identified, staff piloted the ideas and implications for evaluation at seven TCUs and one elementary school. These pilot meetings provided venues for testing the Framework. Further, presentations at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education in New Zealand (2005) and at both

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Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College

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WIPCE Conference, Stoney Reserve, Alberta, Canada

*The discussion of an Indigenous Framework for evaluation draws primarily from the values, knowledge and histories of tribal people in the United States.*

American and Canadian Indian education and evaluation conferences helped in confirming the emergent concepts. Literature by Indigenous peoples from the United States, Canada, and New Zealand has also informed and influenced the curriculum.

Our discussion of an Indigenous Framework for evaluation draws primarily from the values, knowledge, and histories of tribal people in the United States. However, our use of the term Indigenous includes members of American Indian tribes, Native Hawaiians, Alaskan Natives, First Nations, and Aboriginal peoples of Canada and the Pacific Islands whose wisdom has contributed to this Framework.

## Guiding Principles of the Framework

The field of evaluation draws heavily on research methodologies. This close connection is problematic to many American Indian people whose tribes and families have suffered from a long history of intrusive studies by anthropologists and other researchers that brought little more than exploitation and the loss of cultural ownership to Indian people. Many stories were told in the focus groups of ways in which evaluation had been used in the past to justify claims of program failure and to take away resources. However, we now use research for our own ends, and evaluation can also respond to our agendas for change.

In developing an Indigenous Framework for evaluation, we are guided by the following principles:

- American Indian tribes have ways of assessing merit or worth based on traditional values and cultural expressions. This knowledge should inform how evaluation is conducted and used in our communities.

- Indigenous framing for evaluation incorporates broadly held values while remaining flexible and responsive to local traditions and cultures.
- Responsive evaluation uses practices and methods from the field of evaluation that fit our needs and conditions.
- By defining evaluation, its meaning, practice, and usefulness in our own terms, we take ownership. We are not merely responding to the requirements imposed by Western practices.
- Evaluation should respect and serve tribal goals for self-determination and sovereignty.
- Evaluation is an opportunity for learning from our programs and effectively using information to create strong, viable tribal communities.



*"We, as tribal people, want research and scholarship that preserves, maintains, and restores our traditions and cultural practices. We want to restore our homelands; revitalize our traditional religious practices; regain our health; and cultivate our economic, social, and governing systems. Our research [and evaluation] can help us maintain our sovereignty and preserve our nationhood."*

*Cheryl Crazy Bull, 1997*

*The framing process is a journey that each community undertakes in developing the approaches to evaluation that fit its cultural and contemporary situations.*



*Native American Week, Chief Dull Knife College*

## Training Goals

The goals of the AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Training Workshop are to:

1. Explore how core tribal/Indigenous values should influence our approach to evaluation practices;
2. Build capacity for conducting evaluations that are responsive to our context and communities; and
3. Assess which components of Western evaluation practice can be useful in meeting our goals for evaluation.
4. Discuss the balance between our Indigenous knowing and Western evaluation practice, and contribute to the discourse on evaluation theory.

We want to center evaluation within our cultural norms, then look at methods appropriate for our situations. In taking ownership of evaluation and conducting it from an Indigenous framing, we may choose to use methods that are appropriate to our own tribal ways of knowing and which are not within the normal practice of Western evaluation. However, some of the methods we may choose are common to Western evaluation and research practices. During the training, we will discuss various Western evaluation methods that may fit within an Indigenous framing and explore strategies for adapting these methods to our contexts. On this journey, we will:

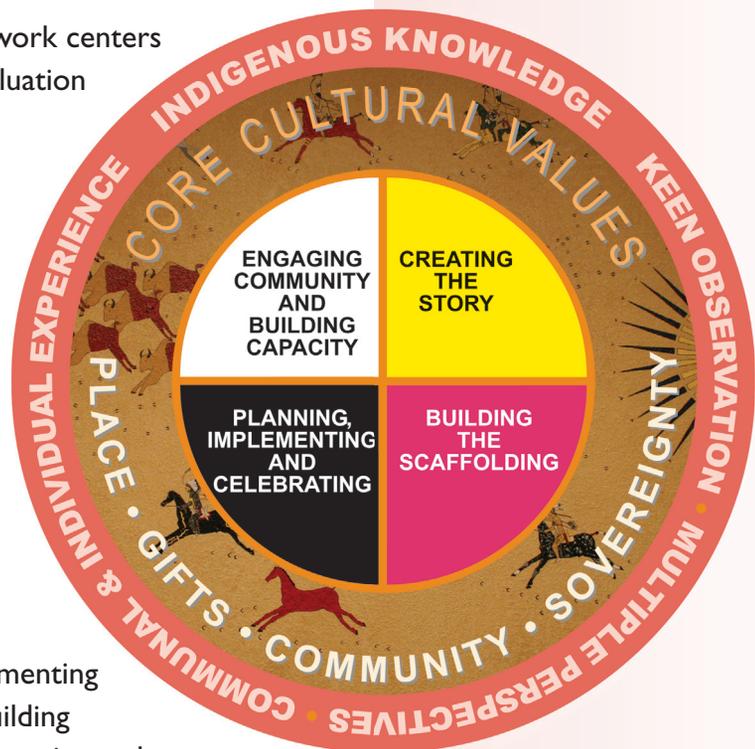
- Discuss Indigenous ways of knowing—our epistemologies for explaining the world.
- Explore cultural values and connect these to evaluation practice.
- Identify ways to include community in the evaluation in the process.

- Enter and create our story—gain a full understanding of the story we intend to tell through evaluating our program.
- Learn how to assess the story as it unfolds—explore questions that can guide us and strategies for seeking answers through responsive evaluation design and methods.
- Consider how to best collect data to understand the ongoing story of our program.
- Identify ways to celebrate the story of the evaluation to the community as well as to funders.

## Model for the Indigenous Evaluation Framework

The AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework centers evaluation in traditional ways of knowing. Evaluation leads to new knowledge, so our own epistemologies—our ways of knowing are essential to our evaluation practice. We also need to embed evaluation within cultural values. The Framework identifies four core cultural values that influence approaches to evaluation in Indigenous communities. Once we center evaluation in our values and ways of knowing, we can adapt and implement Western evaluation practices.

The model illustrates how the essential elements of evaluation practice (Creating the Story, Building the Scaffolding, Planning, Implementing and Celebrating, Engaging Community and Building Capacity) are guided by Indigenous ways of knowing and core cultural values.



## How to Use These Materials

Although our primary focus is educational evaluation, and more specifically evaluation of STEM education, this workbook, including the resources and articles, present a general framing for an Indigenous approach to evaluation. The approach described is applicable to all types of programs in Indian Country, including community-based health and human services programs, government sponsored programs, and others.

We believe that there are many entry points into this Framework, and we anticipate that each person and community will use the material in different ways. We offer a number of suggestions, resources and worksheets to assist in applying the Framework. We have built our metaphor for evaluation and created connections from one section to the other.

### Outline of the Sections

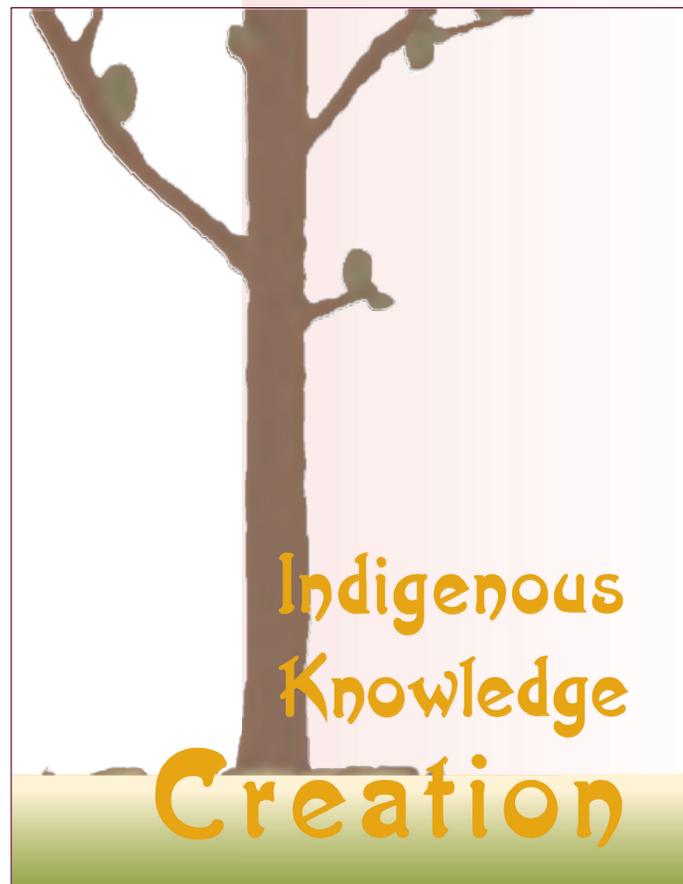
The *AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework* manual is organized in the following eight sections:

1. **Weaving the Basket:** Describes the role of metaphor as a traditional teaching device and explains the metaphor for the Framework.
2. **Creating Knowledge:** Explains the relationship between evaluation and knowledge creation and explores traditional ways of knowing or creating knowledge.
3. **Core Cultural Values:** Grounds evaluation within core cultural values common in American Indian and Alaskan Native communities.
4. **Engaging Community in Evaluation:** Describes different dimensions for community participation and engagement in evaluation.

5. **Creating Our Story:** Describes how to construct the program story, develop a conceptual model, and select questions or evaluative statements to guide an evaluation, the final telling of the story.
6. **Building the Scaffolding:** Describes how to design an evaluation to capture multiple perspectives and to assess change.
7. **Responsive Information Gathering:** Provides advice to consider when gathering data and conducting assessments.
8. **Planning, Implementing and Celebrating:** Describes how to construct an evaluation plan, interpret data, and celebrate learning.

During the workshop, hands-on exercises will help participants apply aspects of the Framework. Activities and scenarios, which may be used with the exercises, are in the Exercise section.

The framing process is a journey that each community undertakes in developing approaches to evaluation that fit its cultural and contemporary situations. In presenting the Framework, our goal was not to provide a How To manual for Indigenous evaluation, but rather this initiative offers a guide for a journey with suggestions and recommendations; however, the final destination will be determined within each community.



#### *Reference*



See Resources and Readings for examples, relevant papers and articles that relate to elements of the Framework.

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