Responsible Research for Tribal Communities
Project Overview

What is this project?

The National Congress of American Indians' (NCAI) Policy Research Center has designed a tool to assist tribal leaders, Native students and other Native community members to understand and manage research and program evaluation. Learners are presented with typical research scenarios faced by tribal leadership and are given the opportunity to consider Western research activities, while emphasizing an Indigenous perspective and approach. The five modules of this research curriculum are currently being field tested and will be finalized for public distribution in early 2009.

Why undertake the project?

Access to data allows tribal leaders to make informed decisions, be proactive about shaping the future of their communities, secure funding for programs to benefit the community, and refine the programs currently offered to tribal citizens. However, many Native people are wary of research and do not trust researchers. This is largely due to the fact that 'research' generally reminds Native people of the myriad projects conducted by outsiders that did not benefit Native communities and even resulted in harm to Native communities.

As increasing numbers of Native people are developing the skills to understand and conduct research, Native communities are becoming more comfortable with research and program evaluation activities. However, the research process requires specific skills and without these skills, it is difficult to evaluate the impact (positive or negative) of particular projects. Through this curriculum, tribal leaders and Native communities can build their capacity to engage with research, allowing them to access and understand the data that will benefit their communities.

About the curriculum

By recognizing the values of Western research approaches and Indigenous ways of knowing, tribal leaders can choose to reap the benefits of Western research while still respecting their own community standards. This research curriculum is intended to be a resource for tribal leadership as they fulfill their role as responsible and proactive stewards of their Native communities. The curriculum helps start a dialogue in reconciling Indigenous and Western worldviews and provides practical information on how to engage with research. The five learning modules broadly cover the most critical concerns facing Native communities interested in research.

Module 1: Foundations of Research

This module addresses the following key concepts:

- Introducing the basic tribal values concerning research that will be emphasized throughout the curriculum

- Introducing the context in which a tribal leader may need a working knowledge of research and related issues

Module 2: Managing the Design and Planning of Research
This module addresses the following key concepts:
- Designing a research study, including how-to lessons and practical considerations
- Guiding a research design process
- Developing a research plan

Module 3: Ethics as a Guide for Managing Research
This module addresses the following key concepts:
- Knowing the basic ethical considerations for conducting research
- Developing skills to apply ethical considerations to research

Module 4: Conducting Research with Others
This module addresses the following concepts:
- Identifying the basic considerations involved in evaluating a research partner
- Identifying key characteristics of tribal research policy, Institutional Review Boards, cooperative agreements, and research agreements
- Introducing a skill set for contributing to a successful partnership

Module 5: Understanding Evaluation
This module addresses the following key concepts:
- Implementing "Program Evaluation"
- Validating basic principles of culturally competent evaluation in tribal communities
- Identifying what evaluation can be expected to measure

About the NCAI Policy Research Center and this project
The NCAI Policy Research Center was launched in 2004 as a tribally-driven national think tank with the vision of "supporting Indian Country in shaping its own future." The mission of the NCAI Policy Research Center is to "provide tribal leaders with the best available knowledge to make strategically proactive policy decisions in a framework of Native wisdom that positively impact the future of Native peoples." This project reflects our mission by providing tribal leaders with an Indigenous tool to engage with, and access, the benefits of research while safeguarding the community against detrimental outcomes.

About the Project Team
The NCAI Policy Research Center is pleased to partner with the First American Land-grant College and Organization Network (FALCON), the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), and a number of independent consultants in developing and piloting this curriculum.