



Culturally Grounded Assessment Practices at Tribal Colleges and Universities

A Landscape Analysis
Illustrating How TCUs
Can **Leverage**
Assessment to Drive
Their Missions

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Culturally Grounded Assessment at TCUs: A Look at the Literature & Current Practices

Study Introduction and Purpose

The College Fund engages in applied research projects to drive the implementation of its mission, strategic plan, and programming. Its applied research agenda focuses on generating knowledge that enables the College Fund to be a responsive partner to the tribal colleges (TCUs) and Native scholars it serves.

Tribal colleges have culture at the heart of the Indigenous higher education they provide. Cultural resiliency is part of their origin stories. TCUs were chartered and founded as part of the growing tribal self-determination movement in the 1970s and have dual missions dedicated to sustaining Native cultures and languages and to reclaiming higher education to better fit the needs and aspirations of Native students and Native communities (Boyer, 2015). Given this broader context and the important role TCUs continue to play in reflecting and revitalizing Native cultures, understanding and supporting culturally grounded assessment practices (CAPs) at TCUs is one of the College Fund's current strategic priorities (see strategic plan metric 5b). To intentionally support and elevate this work, the College Fund must understand the current state of culturally grounded assessment at TCUs.

*For TCUs to achieve their dual missions, in addition to measuring how students are progressing along academic lines, it is also necessary for TCUs to **assess how students are attaining the cultural goals integrated into TCU charters, missions, and strategies.***

This applied research project provides an overview of culturally grounded assessment practices at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) through a landscape analysis. A landscape analysis was chosen for this project to ensure community needs—the needs of TCUs and the students and communities they serve—were understood and remained at the center of our work (National Student Support Accelerator, 2024); considerations such as *Who will benefit from this work?* and *What do they need to be supported?* were prioritized throughout this project. As mentioned above, TCUs are unique Indigenous institutions of higher education, and their missions include both academic and cultural goals. For TCUs to achieve their dual missions, in addition to measuring how students are progressing along academic lines, it is also

necessary for TCUs to assess how students are attaining the cultural goals integrated into TCU charters, missions, and strategies. By providing an overview of the CAPs landscape and needs at TCUs, this work intends to spotlight TCUs making progress in this area and provide examples that can serve as a frame of reference for TCUs who would like to better leverage assessment to actualize their cultural missions. This work is also designed to offer knowledge that can help the College Fund focus its programming on TCU-defined needs in this space and support TCUs in fully realizing their cultural missions in service of Native Nation-Building and self-determination.

Methodology

This study sought to discover the current state of culturally grounded assessment practices TCUs have in place to support their cultural missions, and it was designed to answer three applied research questions:

1. What is the history of culturally grounded assessment at TCUs?

2. How does culturally grounded assessment take place at TCUs?
3. What are some specific examples of culturally grounded assessment practices currently in practice at TCUs?

To achieve this goal, three methods were used: 1) a review of the scholarly literature that spoke to the history of CAPs at TCUs, 2) a scan of TCU websites to identify CAPs resources and practices and to document how cultural goals are integrated into TCUs' institutional strategies and assessment structures, and 3) interviews with TCU personnel to better understand the CAPs practices currently in place at TCUs. Prior to delving into our research findings, we provide a definition of culturally grounded assessment and a brief overview of assessment in higher education and at TCUs to outline the broader context for this work.

Defining Culturally Grounded Assessment

Culturally grounded assessment can be defined in multiple ways. For this study, we consider the "what," "where," and "how" of CAPs. The "what" framing looks at the culturally focused goals and objectives articulated by TCUs to actualize their cultural missions. For example, a TCU might have articulated an objective that states "Students will earn an average score of 80% on the Culture and Language post-assessment." Measuring progress towards this objective is one way to conceptualize culturally grounded assessment. The "where" factor focuses on where within a TCU's assessment structure cultural goals, objectives, and outcomes are defined and, specifically, where TCUs express and integrate culture into their mission statements, strategic plans, and institutional and student learning outcomes. In the "how" framing, culturally grounded assessment is viewed as an approach to assessment—the practices and tools that a TCU might use as part of conducting the assessment process. An example includes TCUs that have designed assessment practices grounded in their cultural values. Highlighting CAPs through a "what," "where," and "how" framing is important because it's through using all three of these approaches that TCUs can design and implement effective CAPs practices that are rooted in and drivers of their institutional mission, vision, and values.

How TCU Culturally Grounded Assessment Practices Fit into the Broader Landscape of Assessment and Accreditation in Higher Education

In higher education settings, assessment is defined as a set of activities designed to gather evidence "regarding the performance and achievement" of students and educational institutions (Rawlusk, 2018). Effectively, it is through assessment processes that institutions show how their goals and objectives are being met in service of their missions and in support of student success. Assessment holds colleges accountable to their goals and objectives. In higher education, the most visible example of assessment is accreditation. Accreditation is where external accrediting bodies evaluate colleges to determine whether they meet certain standards for quality. Accreditation status is important in higher education. Being accredited means a college meets certain standards for delivering high quality higher education and that they have plans and processes in place to ensure they will continue to progress toward their goals. Accreditation is also important because it's a prerequisite for colleges to receive Title IV federal funding for student aid. Through the Higher Education Act of 1965, Congress established that only institutions and programs accredited by a federally recognized accrediting organization can provide students with access to federal student aid, including Pell Grants and student loans. Federal funding is critical for TCUs given that at least 70% of TCU funding derives from federal sources (Nelson & Frye, 2016). Also, over 70% of tribal college students are Pell Grant recipients and have high levels of financial need. Thus, accreditation is critical to TCU sustainability and helping Native students obtain the funding they need to access tribal college education. Additionally, the American

Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) requires that TCUs must be accredited to be admitted as regular, voting members (AIHEC, 2022).

Accreditation review follows a specific process and is based in part on criteria that measures a college's demonstrated commitment to engaging in an assessment process, emphasizing that a commitment to assessment is a necessary part of continuous improvement and should be "deeply embedded in an institution's activities" (Higher Learning Commission, 2024). When reviewing an institution's process for assessment, accreditors focus on assessment activities that apply to student learning goals at the institutional and program levels. For colleges, institutional-level assessment often involves the creation of a set of Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs). ILOs support the college's mission and are described in the college's strategic plan. ILOs define the measurable skills, abilities, knowledge, and/or values that every graduate of the college will be able to demonstrate upon degree completion. ILOs help define what educational success looks like for a college (e.g. institutional effectiveness) and what skills students should have upon graduation. Each Department within the college also creates a set of program-specific learning outcomes (PLOs) that are based on the institutional learning outcomes and describe what skills, abilities, knowledge, and values each academic program will teach to students. Progress towards these learning outcomes can then be measured through assessment practices. (See Figure 1 for a graphic illustrating how the institutional, program, and course goals and outcomes are related to a college's mission.)

Meeting the requirements established by external accrediting bodies has been a driving force behind the implementation of sound assessment processes in higher education institutions. In recent years, however, scholars have shifted their focus away from the importance of assessment for accountability to external accreditation bodies to spotlight a greater internal purpose for assessment: organizational learning and improvement (Russell & Markle, 2017). Organizational learning refers to an organization that honors, gathers, and applies multiple types of knowledge—evaluation findings, program data, and staff lived experiences—to reflect on its work, learn, and apply those insights to adapt and improve its programming and organizational strategy (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). To meet this goal, it is common for colleges, including TCUs, to create and implement a mission-based assessment process or cycle that involves defining goals, articulating objectives, gathering, analyzing and reflecting on data, and taking some sort of action based on the results and findings. This last piece—the action taken based on assessment findings and reflections—is often referred to as "closing the loop" and is seen as the precursor to organizational improvement (Schoepp & Benson, 2016).

The process of forming a sustainable assessment process that is visible throughout institutional activities requires engagement from a diverse set of college personnel. As such, employees at all levels are often involved in assessment in some way and participate at minimum in some goal setting and

Figure 1

Relationship of institutional, program, and course goals & outcomes to the institutional mission



data collection activities. Many institutions have entire departments devoted to specific assessment activities, including analyzing and reporting data to improve institutional effectiveness. Even students' roles in assessment have started to evolve, with some scholars calling for the integration of peer-evaluation and other student-centered methods as ways to ensure learning remains at the center of assessment activities (Rawlusk, 2018). Regardless of who is involved in what ways and at what levels, what is clear is that assessment centered around organizational learning is a cooperative and collaborative process. TCUs stand out in this space, as inviting and including a diverse group of college and community members to participate in their assessment processes has emerged as a defining characteristic of their culturally grounded assessment practices (American Indian College Fund, 2023a).

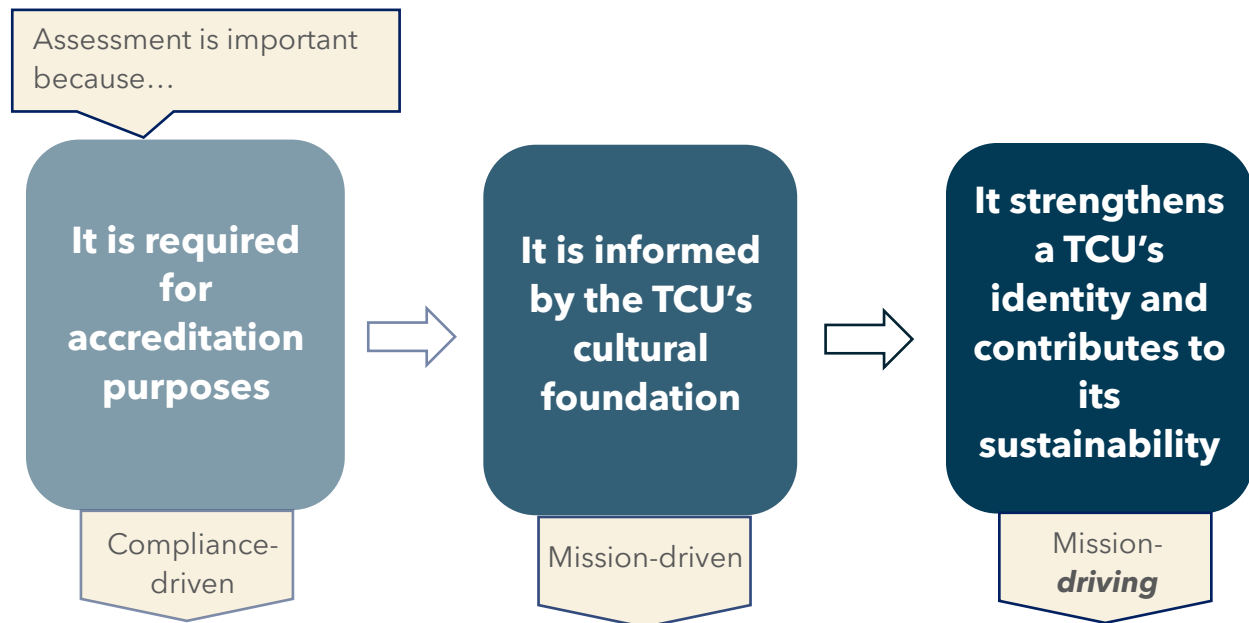
The Unique and Evolving Role of Assessment at TCUs: From Compliance to Mission-Driving

Scholarly literature has discussed assessment at TCUs for over 30 years; however, there are a limited number of papers on this topic. Whether speaking broadly about assessment at TCUs or taking a closer look at assessment at a particular TCU, articles often first acknowledge assessment's role in accreditation (an external factor), before shifting the focus to its more intrinsic purpose and highlighting the possibility for assessment to be both mission-driven and *mission-driving* (Figure 1). Rather than completing assessment activities only to remain in compliance with accreditation agencies (compliance-driven assessment), TCUs can take ownership over their assessment activities and ensure their assessment practices are aligned with and supportive of their missions.

Most literature in this area mentions the unique missions of TCUs, recognizing that standard approaches to assessment likely haven't and wouldn't account for the cultural aspirations inherent in the missions of TCUs (AIHEC, 1994; George & McLaughlin, 2008; American Indian College Fund, 2023a). TCUs were founded by Native people with the intent to "reclaim their cultural heritage" and rebuild Native nations (Crazy Bull & Guillory, 2018, p. 96). Even though each TCU is unique in its Tribal connections, all TCUs share as part of their missions the goal of cultural advancement through the teaching of tribal history, language, and other cultural practices (American Indian College Fund, 2023a). What a chronological scan of the literature reveals is that by developing their own assessment processes and practices rooted in Native values and practices and supportive of their institutional, program, and course goals and objectives, TCUs can move from a compliance-driven to a sustainability-focused and culturally responsive approach to assessment (AIHEC, 1994; Karlberg, 2010; Wall et al., 2022). In other words, assessment presents an opportunity for TCUs to recognize and strengthen their identities as Indigenous institutions of higher education, all while meeting accreditation standards.

Figure 1

Progression of the Conceptualization of the Role of Assessment at TCUs



Building a Conceptual Model: TCU Culturally Grounded Assessment Practices in the Literature and in Applied Contexts

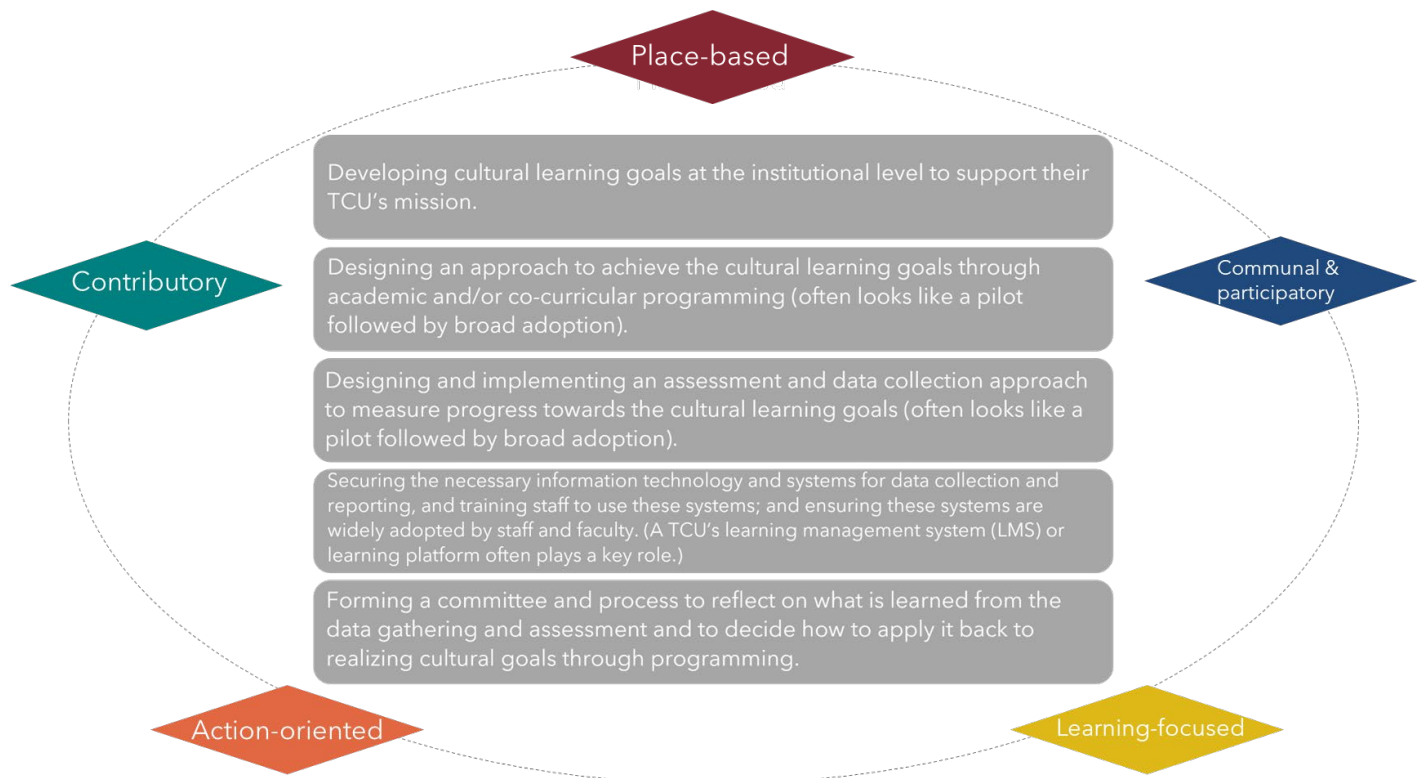
Literature delving into specific culturally grounded assessment practices designed and used by TCUs is limited. Less than 20 articles were identified as directly relevant to this study. Of those articles, only a handful were published after 2010. Most of the articles spoke to the importance of assessment to drive continuous improvement at TCUs, noting that each TCU would be best served by assessment practices designed from within to meet its unique needs, primarily referencing TCUs' cultural goals and missions designed to strengthen their respective Tribal Nation(s). This emphasis is closely aligned with the Indigenous Evaluation Framework (IEF), which serves as a guide for informing culturally responsive evaluation and assessment activities in tribal communities, primarily those activities occurring in an educational space (LaFrance & Nichols, 2009). The available literature, like the IEF, focuses on learning and growth for the TCU and benefits for the greater tribal community as the primary reason for engaging in assessment.

The literature did offer contextualized examples of institution-specific assessment practices at TCUs, and after reviewing this literature, five core characteristics that define successful CAPs approaches emerged across TCUs. These defining characteristics—place-based, communal and participatory, learning-focused, action-oriented, and contributory—were reinforced by current examples and insights shared by TCU personnel in the staff interviews for this project. Further, the documents and resources shared on TCU websites and reviewed for this project helped clarify where cultural goals and objectives—the basis for what is being measured through CAPs—are built into TCU organizational structures and strategies, and how they are defined.

Considering both the literature and current CAPs practices shared by TCUs, the landscape analysis revealed that TCUs that have engaged in the five key steps pictured below are emerging as strong examples of how CAPs can be used to contribute to the continuous improvement and cultural missions of tribal colleges (Figure 2). The five characteristics of successful CAPS approaches plus the five steps for effective CAPs design that we documented form the “5 + 5” TCU CAPs model that TCUs can use as a guide for this work.

Figure 2

5 + 5 TCU CAPs Model



Characteristics of Mission-Driving Culturally Grounded Assessment Practices at TCUs

The TCUs who are developing effective culturally grounded assessment practices have developed CAPs approaches that reflect five defining characteristics, creating a model for CAPs development that other TCUs can build on. These five characteristics are:

Place-based: Place-based education emphasizes learning that is rooted in local culture, environment, and community (Deloria Jr. & Wildcat, 2001). TCUs stand as a prime example of this, as they were formed by tribal citizens who worked together to establish higher education institutions that were located in Tribal communities and positioned to contribute to the ongoing development of their citizens. As such, TCUs have unique missions in that they aim to meet both academic and cultural goals connected to the continued development of the Native Nations they serve. For assessment to be effective, it should be place-based in the sense that it's not only inspired by but grounded in the mission of each TCU and each TCU's unique connections to its social, cultural, and geographic location

(Chenault, 2008). The literature shows it is common for TCUs to begin with increasing awareness around their missions and institutional goals when developing or working to improve their approach to assessment (Karlberg, 2007; Yellow Bird, 1999). Revisiting their mission creates the opportunity for TCUs to revisit their institutional and program-scale cultural objectives as well, an important initial step in strengthening culturally grounded assessment practices.

Communal & participatory: In alignment with an Indigenous evaluation framework, in all its stages, CAPs at TCUs involve and engage the community, meaning those impacted by assessment (LaFrance & Nichols, 2007; Wall, 2022). In the TCU context, the assessment community could—and often does—include college personnel (including the board, administration, staff, and faculty), students, and the larger Tribal community being served by the TCU. At TCUs, community engagement is often exemplified through gathering partner feedback (American Indian College Fund, 2023a). By gathering, listening, responding to, and acting on feedback that is shared, TCUs have built trust among community members and united them around a common mission. Karlberg (2007) discussed the importance of honoring community engagement throughout the planning and implementation phases of assessment in their case study of Northwest Indian College (NWIC). Through surveying staff, faculty, and administrators, NWIC created an assessment plan that was responsive to the College's needs. Honoring the feedback received from the College's personnel contributed to well-rounded support of the assessment plan during implementation. Additionally, NWIC administered a community needs assessment, alumni survey, and multiple student surveys to gather data to inform their strategic planning and development of the assessment process. Taken together, these communal and participatory approaches illustrate the value of reciprocity, or a "continuous and intentional exchange process," one of the Rs in the Six Rs framework proposed as a model for Indigenous research (Tsosie et al., 2022).

Learning-focused: Conceptualizations of assessment have continued to evolve, with an emphasis shifting from that of compliance to learning. External accreditation agencies—such as the HLC—and TCUs alike recognize learning as the primary impetus for assessment (Merdanian, 2015). In an Indigenous context, learning can be defined as an active coming-to-know process that is part of the way Native peoples have always observed, experienced, and reflected in the world so that they can be better caretakers of the relationships, organizations, and landscapes they are part of. In their study of designing place-based and culturally-informed assessment in the geosciences, Geraghty et al. (2014) identified that participants opposed standardized assessments but valued pre- and post-tests because they allowed instructors to make decisions regarding instruction and encouraged student reflection, both of which center learning, or improvement over time, as the ultimate goal. Though this particular example focuses on a course-level assessment, it highlights the importance of considering the overall goal of assessment when making decisions regarding assessment approaches and tools. Furthermore, learning is a highly contextual process and closely related to the concept of relevance—one of the six Rs referenced above (Tsosie et al., 2022). Asking the questions, *Why do we do it this way?* or *What is this used for?* encourage those designing and implementing assessments to consider their choices in light of the contexts in which assessment will be applied.

Action-oriented: Culturally grounded assessment practices not only involve learning and making sense of information, but also result in action (Wall, 2022). One of the earliest examples of this data-analysis-action cycle found in the scholarly literature on TCUs comes from Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC). TMCC administered a qualitative survey to students to better understand how students rated themselves regarding various institutional outcomes. The results illustrated that students were receiving cultural information in only a few courses from a couple of instructors. The results of the survey were discussed by faculty and staff, and PD activities that focused on increasing cultural knowledge for the College's employees were implemented. The following year's survey showed

students were receiving more culture in their classes (Bird, 1999), demonstrating how the steps of an assessment process can work together to “close the loop.” The fact that this example appeared in the literature over two decades ago speaks to the limited research on CAPs at TCUs; nonetheless, the example stands as one that demonstrates how an assessment process can be designed to result in action that supports institutional mission.

Contributory: Research on assessment at TCUs shows that effective CAPs contribute to a TCU’s overall wellbeing and sustainability (American Indian College Fund, 2023b). In an interview with leaders at NWIC, participants shared that assessment and evaluation played a “critical role” in promoting Indigenous self-determination and knowledge (Bunkowski & Shelton, 2015, p. 15). In forming their current approach to assessment, instead of asking “what” assessment is, staff at IAIA asked “who” assessment is for. Their answer to that question emphasized the purpose of assessment as one designed to serve the institution, its students, and its partner communities through producing information that contributes to continuous improvement (Wall et al., 2022). When TCUs establish assessment processes that result in the production of data in relation to their pre-established goals, objectives, and outcomes, then they are laying the foundation to engage in assessment practices that contribute to their continuous learning and development.

Current Examples of Culturally Grounded Assessment Practices at TCUs

TCUs have continued to work to strengthen how they articulate and fulfill the cultural goals expressed in their mission statements and organizational strategies. The examples below highlight the stories of TCUs who have engaged in this work over the past few years. Each example illustrates where culture is embedded into each TCU’s organizational strategy and assessment structure, what their defined cultural goals and outcomes are, and how they use particular assessment approaches to measure and evaluate their progress towards these goals and outcomes. Furthermore, these examples illustrate some of the challenges that TCUs have experienced while creating and implementing new assessment processes, in addition to how TCUs have addressed those challenges and even turned them into opportunities to strengthen the overall impact of assessment on organizational learning.

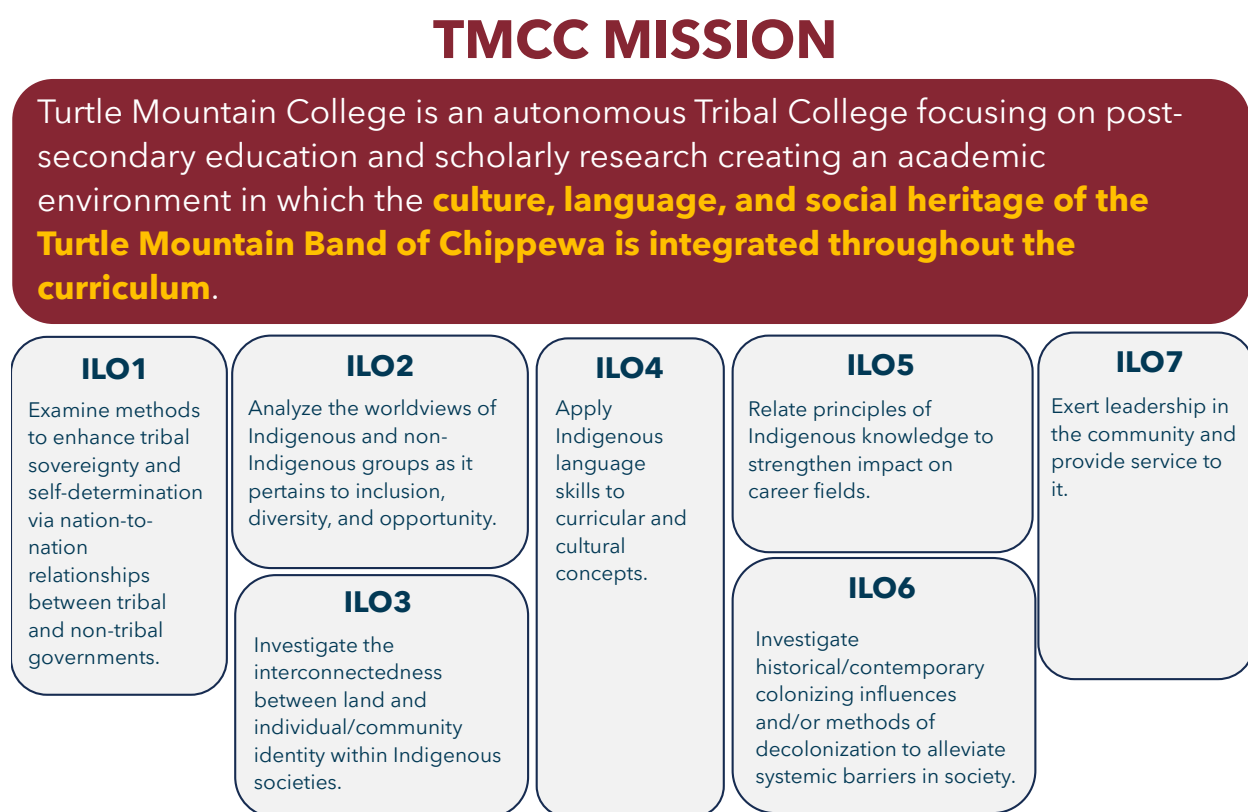
The examples below were developed through interviews with personnel working in assessment or institutional research at the TCU highlighted and were also informed by data gathered during the web scan. These TCUs and their personnel were selected and contacted for this report based upon information found during the web scan phase of this project, which suggested that each of these TCUs had designed and was implementing culturally grounded assessment practices unique to their institutions.

Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC) - Indigenous Institutional Learning Outcomes

Mission: Turtle Mountain College is an autonomous Tribal College focusing on post-secondary education and scholarly research creating an academic environment in which the culture, language, and social heritage of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa is integrated throughout the curriculum.

Overview and Context. In 2023, Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC) built upon previous efforts to define and assess the college’s cultural goals by creating a model premised on Indigenous Institutional Learnings Outcomes (IILOs) that allows them to engage in cultural assessment across all programs and courses. Their new approach is ongoing and ensures the institution’s mission-based commitment to culture remains universally at the heart of their work (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Illustration of TMCC's Mission-Grounded Indigenous ILOs



How Culture is Reflected and Defined in TCU Strategy and Assessment Structure. TMCC spells out its institutional commitment to sustaining and reflecting Native culture in three places: its mission statement, its strategic plan, and in a set of mission-focused Indigenous institutional learning outcomes (ILOs) that define the cultural goals and objectives its cultural assessment practices are focused on measuring. These Indigenous ILOs are unique because they reflect guiding Indigenous values that inform TMCC's approach to higher education and were defined by and for TMCC through an extensive feedback process that included college staff and community members. These new Indigenous ILOs replace a set of older ILOs modeled on norms for mainstream colleges and reflect the unique identity of TMCC as a Native-serving tribal college.

Culturally Grounded Approach and Practices. The eventual creation of the Indigenous ILOs was spurred by data collected by TMCC that showed an opportunity to strengthen cultural integration and assessment at multiple levels. AIHEC AIMS data depicted a lack of language fluency among the TMCC community, program review findings submitted by faculty called attention to entire programs lacking clear alignment with the cultural aspects of the College's mission, and students and elders expressed a desire for cultural growth within the curriculum. In consideration of the data, Institutional Research (IR) staff, institutional committees associated with student learning and program health, faculty representatives, and institutional administration reviewed the cultural assessment practices that were currently in place and observed that for many programs of study, culturally grounded assessment was largely absent.

TMCC recognized that they needed to account for holistic cultural assessment across all courses and programs and moved to create a model grounded in their mission—specifically that the cultural heritage of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa will be “brought to bear throughout the curriculum.” This model would provide data designed to inform decision-making at the course and program levels.

Facilitated by the IR Director and Vice President of Academic Affairs, a team of faculty was formed to create a set of Indigenous learning outcomes for TMCC. The faculty team began by reviewing preexisting resources that spoke to cultural assessment, including an article that had been written about cultural assessment practices at TMCC in the 1990's, AIHEC's monograph on Assessment Essentials for Tribal Colleges published in 2010, and a set of Indigenous learning outcomes developed in 2011 by Confederation College in Canada, among other documents. These resources, in conjunction with the feedback that was previously received from the student senate, elders, and faculty, served as the foundation for the first draft of Indigenous ILOs.

Finalizing the draft Indigenous ILOs included a year-long process of meeting to review, discuss, and refine them with multiple groups, including students, faculty, and staff. The finalized outcomes received nearly unanimous approval from the student learning committee, allowing their implementation to move forward with widespread support.

How This Example Reflects the TCU CAPS Model. This example reflects the TCU CAPS model described above in several ways. First, community feedback from students, faculty, and elders served as the catalyst for creating the current Indigenous Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs). Input from these community groups continued to be important – and was actively sought out – as the outcomes were developed. Throughout the process of revising the Indigenous ILOs, feedback shared by the community groups was honored through continuous dialogue, an approach that as noted above resulted in wide-ranging support for the finalization, approval, and implementation of the Indigenous ILOs. Additionally, the faculty group responsible for devising the initial set of Indigenous ILOs began by looking at TMCC's mission and rooting the outcomes in its cultural goals, ensuring the resultant model would be place-based and contribute to the College's sustainability. Furthermore, plans for implementation reflect a learning-focused and action-oriented approach in that they specify who will be responsible for inputting, analyzing, and sharing the data, when this will occur, and how the findings will be applied to practice.

Implementation Status and Next Steps. With the approval of the Indigenous ILOs by the Student Learning Committee in 2022, TMCC faculty have been working to align them with at least one learning activity or assignment in each of their courses. Once the outcomes are mapped to corresponding learning activities or assignments within academic courses, then TMCC's Distance Learning Coordinator, in conjunction with the course instructor, pairs them together in Canvas, the college's Learning Management System. After the pairing has been completed, faculty can efficiently measure or assess the Indigenous ILOs alongside other program and course outcomes using the three-point rubric designed to accompany the outcomes. This process will allow TMCC to efficiently gather clean, consistent, and rich data at the end of each semester. The Institutional Research (IR) team will analyze and visualize the data and then review it each term with the college's Student Learning Committee. Following the review of findings with the IR team, the student learning committee will create recommendations based upon the results and then share them with the instructional faculty and co-curricular units through department meetings. Looking ahead, TMCC plans to make tailored Indigenous ILO assessment data directly available to faculty so they can use it to inform course and assignment-level decisions. High level assessment data will also be made available to the public for transparency on TMCC's attainment of its cultural-grounded learning outcomes in alignment with its cultural mission.

Challenges and Opportunities. The Indigenous ILOs were the result of an intensive, collaborative, and participatory three-year process. About three years elapsed between when the initial idea for creating the outcomes was voiced to when the outcomes were first piloted within TMCC courses. During those three years, many groups—both on and off-campus—were involved in designing the Indigenous ILOs and creating awareness around them. Additionally, Indigenous ILO planning and

development efforts needed to ensure that once the outcomes were approved there was a system in place that would allow them to be efficiently assessed by faculty and that could produce data that was both accessible and meaningful to those who could benefit from it. Furthermore, to provide accurate and valid data, TMCC needs to design and deliver training on how to use the Indigenous ILO rubric as a measurement tool to all faculty, including adjuncts.

The sheer amount of time and effort required to bring people together to propel the creation and implementation of the Indigenous ILOs could certainly be seen as the greatest challenge to this process. It was through this lengthy collaboration, however, that what started as an observed need to strengthen cultural assessment materialized into a set of well-supported and widely accepted Indigenous ILOs on track to be implemented into 100% of courses offered at TMCC. Moreover, engaging in the process of creating and implementing the outcomes instigated a closer look across the College's current assessment processes and ended up highlighting additional areas where assessment could be strengthened, such as the General Education curriculum. As TMCC continues to implement the Indigenous ILOs into their courses, the Teacher Education Department has stepped up to support faculty in assessing the outcomes using the Indigenous ILO rubric, turning what was initially a challenge into an opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration in support of the College's mission.

Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC) - TRIBAL Initiative

Mission: The Nebraska Indian Community College provides quality higher education and lifelong educational opportunities for Umoⁿhoⁿ (Omaha), Isanti (Santee Dakota) and all learners.

Overview and Context. For a college to ensure it is fulfilling its mission, assessment must occur at all levels of student learning. Inspired by Midland University's values-based framework for student learning called their DRIVE initiative, NICC moved to create their own culturally grounded framework for student learning and skill-building composed of six attributes rooted in their college's mission, goals, and values. Together, these six attributes spell the acronym "TRIBAL:" Tribal culture, Reciprocal communication, Innovation & technology, Balance, body, mind, & spirit, Analytic & research Skills, Lifelong learning skills). Initially, NICC plans to implement the "TRIBAL" initiative as a co-curricular assessment, laying the groundwork for NICC's current ILOs to be replaced by the TRIBAL attributes in the future.

How Culture is Reflected and Defined in TCU Strategy and Assessment Structure. Collectively, NICC's mission, strategic plan, and TRIBAL initiative include a variety of cultural goals and desired outcomes for student learning. Developing the TRIBAL initiative included performing a SOAR analysis (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results) that included a survey administered to NICC students, its Board of Directors, NICC faculty and staff, and community members. The survey data provided valuable insights in the form of student and community voice that were used to inform the attributes of the TRIBAL initiative, which will become the College's new set of ILOs.

Culturally Grounded Approach and Practices. Ahead of developing NICC's new strategic plan, one of NICC's goals was to strengthen the College's assessment process at the institutional level so that it contained clearly defined objectives closely connected to NICC's mission and values. The SOAR analysis was designed to support the College's effort to align strategic initiatives with organizational values by including questions that asked for participants to rate and provide comments on how well NICC was achieving its core beliefs and institutional goals. The SOAR analysis was administered to NICC's students, Board of Directors, faculty & staff, and community members. An analysis of the quantitative and qualitative survey data revealed positive results, with an opportunity to strengthen how the College was supporting students in achieving institutional goals.

Informed by the results of the SOAR analysis and the model of Midland University's DRIVE initiative, NICC's Director of Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness¹ began the work that led to the creation of the attributes that became the College's TRIBAL initiative. NICC's Academic Dean and faculty division heads were introduced to the attributes early on, and their feedback and support became integral in designing the TRIBAL initiative and moving it forward with staff throughout the college. In fact, it was through discussions with faculty that the idea to work with elders to translate the attributes into the Dakota and Umo'ho languages came about.

Student positionality and voice remained at the center of the creation of the TRIBAL initiative, most notably in decisions regarding how to design and implement the initiative. For example, the TRIBAL initiative is student-friendly in that all materials advertising campus activities will be clearly marked with the letter symbolizing the attribute the activity addresses. Students will be able to see the letter and connect it to a specific attribute. NICC students are expected to participate in co-curricular activities that together allow them to piece together the TRIBAL acronym, therefore facilitating their cultural learning in relation to the College's mission prior to graduating.

How This Example Reflects the TCU CAPs Model. The creation and implementation of the TRIBAL attributes at NICC illustrates many of the characteristics identified in the CAPS model. In particular, NICC's example stands out for its communal, participatory, and place-based approaches. The SOAR analysis that led to the definition of the six attributes involved multiple communities tied to the TCU, including students and community elders. In conjunction with the input shared by various groups through the SOAR analysis, NICC's place-based mission, values, and institutional goals informed the six attributes that together form the TRIBAL initiative. Looking ahead to implementation, student voice will continue to be honored: NICC will actively seek out student input regarding the co-curricular activities provided and their connection to cultural learning around the TRIBAL attributes.

Implementation Status and Next Steps. The TRIBAL initiative is planned to launch for all co-curricular activities at the beginning of the spring 2024 semester. Future plans include expanding the TRIBAL initiative to the academic space so that the attributes can serve as NICC's new set of ILOs.

Challenges and Opportunities. One of the main challenges experienced by NICC that ultimately led to the creation of the TRIBAL initiative was a need to better understand how students were being supported in the co-curricular space. Because NICC doesn't offer any formal student groups, assessing how students were being supported outside of the classroom presented a unique challenge. A lack of student groups combined with limited staff resources meant that a systematized approach that could be clearly communicated, understood, maintained, and adapted across a variety of contexts and activities was necessary. Midland College's DRIVE initiative provided a framework that met those criteria, and because it was values-based, it became a meaningful model for NICC to adapt to support their mission.

Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) – Assessment Re-envisioned through Indigenous Research Methodologies

Mission: The mission of the Institute of American Indian Arts is "to empower creativity and leadership in Indigenous arts and cultures through higher education, lifelong learning, and community engagement."

¹ The Director of Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness who provided the interview for this report is no longer employed at NICC.

This mission is more than a statement. It is the driving force behind all that we do and the guiding principle for our dedicated faculty and staff.

Overview and Context. Informed by Indigenous research methodologies that emphasize the role of Native community values, needs, and engagement, the IAIA assessment committee moved to create an assessment process created by and for IAIA in 2015. The result was a three-step, values-based Indigenous assessment model emphasizing dialogue, respect, community, and honoring. These four values are deeply connected to the college and its mission.

How Culture is Reflected and Defined in TCU Strategy and Assessment Structure. Culture is reflected in IAIA's mission, vision, values, and strategic directions. IAIA's cultural assessment model came from a period of deep reflection on how to design an assessment process that first and foremost aligned with and supported the College's mission, vision, and values. Informed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, the assessment committee at IAIA set to work on designing a process rooted in IAIA's cultural values and focused on benefiting the community being served. In other words, the Assessment Committee focused on designing a values-based assessment process that would provide the College with meaningful student learning data that could be used to guide continuous improvement at all levels in service of their institutional mission and goals.

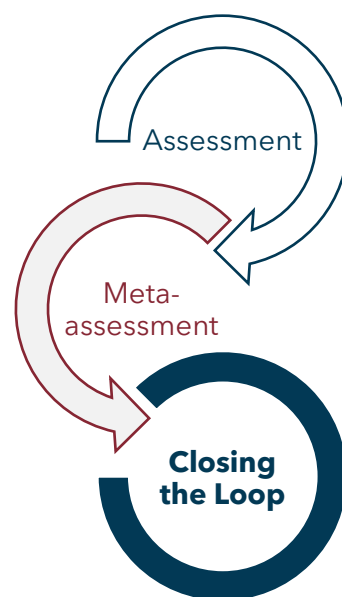
Culturally Grounded Approaches and Practices. The Indigenous Assessment Model at IAIA consists of three phases—assessment, meta-assessment, and closing the loop—all of which involve a gathering of community, a focus on learning, and the production of deliverables designed to inform action (Figure 4). Initially, in the assessment phase, an assessment leader invites various IAIA personnel, including faculty, staff, and students, to review, discuss, and honor student work. Ahead of the gathering, the assessment leader requests artifacts of student work from the course or program being assessed and prepares the artifacts for review by ensuring all personally identifiable information is removed. The assessment leader shares the artifacts with those who agreed to participate in the assessment, and it is their responsibility to review the student work and prepare to share what they observed in relation to student learning when they gather. At the gathering, the community shares the examples of student learning they identified in the work. This discussion is recorded, and a transcript is produced that serves as the key piece of data for the meta-assessment phase.

In the meta-assessment phase, another group—made up of some of the same individuals from the assessment phase plus additional, new members—read the transcript produced in phase 1 and identify topics that provide insight into student learning. This group then gathers to discuss what they observed about student learning based on the content of the transcript. Through this dialogue, the committee highlights opportunities to strengthen student learning and shares ideas for interventions. This gathering also serves as a space for discussion to occur regarding how student work could be shared with the broader IAIA community.

In the third and last step, closing the loop, an assessment project report is written. The report begins with a basic overview of the assessment that took place, including who was involved, what was

Figure 4

The Three Phases of IAIA's Assessment



assessed, and when follow-up should occur, and then proceeds to respond to a list of eleven additional questions. These questions are designed to lead to the creation of a report that summarizes the discussions that took place, captures additional data that was included as part of the assessment (such as grades), articulates actions that have already occurred in response to the assessment in addition to next steps, and speaks to the values of the process.

How this Example Reflects the TCU CAPs Model. IAIA's assessment model is a unique and powerful example illustrating how TCUs can take ownership over their assessment process. Underpinned by the community-focused approach central to Indigenous Research Methodologies, the assessment model at IAIA was created to meet the needs of the college so that it could continue to grow in meeting the needs of its students. The cultural values that constitute IAIA's assessment model are reflected in their institutional values and speak directly to the importance of actively engaging community members to participate in assessment activities. In addition, by honoring student work and discussing observed examples of student learning, this assessment model ensures that learning remains at the heart of the assessment process. Furthermore, each phase in IAIA's assessment model ends with an action step that serves as the basis for the following step in the process. This "linked" approach provides momentum to the assessment cycle, encouraging it to progress by building upon previous assessment activities and to culminate in actions that help IAIA better meet the needs of its students and community.

Implementation Status and Next Steps. IAIA's assessment model has been fully implemented and is applied by various academic and co-curricular programs throughout the institution.

Challenges and Opportunities. The creation of the Indigenous assessment model at IAIA was initially spurred by the need to meet the criteria for a strong assessment process as set forth by IAIA's accreditation organization, HLC. Like many other TCUs, IAIA had struggled with creating and implementing an assessment process that conformed to their accreditation organization's standard model, as this approach didn't account for their institutional culture and pedagogy. In 2015, IAIA's assessment committee reflected on how they could move forward; influenced by Indigenous research methodologies, the committee resolved to create a process that served their institution and their students, was informed by their institutional values, and would be embraced by faculty. Not only did IAIA produce a model that matched their vision of the assessment process they set out to create, but through the creation and implementation of this model, they have also experienced indirect organizational benefits such as breaking down departmental silos and a stronger academic community.

United Tribes Technical College (UTTC) – Mission-driven and Student-focused Assessment

Mission: United Tribes Technical College provides quality post-secondary education and training to enhance knowledge, diversity, and leadership for all indigenous nations.

Overview and Context. Who does assessment serve? United Tribes Technical College (UTTC) wanted to ensure that their co-curricular assessment practices were serving their students by contributing to their success, as defined on their terms. Based upon a student-centered definition of success that aligned with one of UTTC's Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and came from their student survey, UTTC created an instrument designed to assess how they were supporting students in achieving this outcome and to provide data that could inform how they could improve in this area.

How Culture is Reflected and Defined in TCU Strategy and Assessment Structure. Culture is reflected in the mission and vision of UTTC and in the goals and objectives expressed in their Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and strategic plan. Two of UTTC's strategic areas—a commitment to student learning and success and mission-driven institutional effectiveness—are directly

connected to the cultural assessment practices described in this example. Each of the strategic areas is accompanied by a set of strategic objectives that serve to inform the individual Unit Action Plans created by units representing academics, student services, and administration. Each unit submits biannual progress reports that together contribute to the annual report detailing the college's progress in relation to its strategic objectives.

Culturally Grounded Approaches and Practices. Rather than focusing explicitly on how assessment practices could bolster persistence, retention, and graduation rates (common measures of success in higher education), UTTC asked students what success looks like to them through a survey and worked to account for this definition in their assessment practices. What their findings revealed is that students did not equate success with persistence, retention, or even graduation explicitly; rather, students saw at the heart of success an ability to make a difference in their communities and be a positive influence for their children. In other words, students saw college as an opportunity to facilitate their growth and ability to serve their communities and families.

UTTC's student-centered definition of success was translated into an Institutional Learning Outcome related to Personal and Social Responsibility. The co-curriculum at UTTC offered experiences for students to develop aspects of personal and social responsibility through the housing program, wellness services, healthy lifestyles program, and the cultural activities offered. Led by their institutional research team, UTTC staff created and piloted a student survey designed to measure the objectives within the College's Personal and Social Responsibility institutional learning goal. The assessment results provided a benchmark for UTTC personnel to gauge how well they were supporting students in areas that students shared were important to them. One of the objectives within UTTC's Personal and Social Responsibility ILO is for students to "exhibit knowledge of diverse cultures, identities, and societies". When reviewing student responses to the survey questions that asked about culture, responses illustrated a wide appreciation of the cultural activities offered on campus. Students expressed that they felt these activities facilitated their knowledge about their own and others' Indigenous cultures and helped them become a "better person." Acting upon the survey data and in conjunction with their strategic area of mission-driven institutional effectiveness, UTTC set targets to increase the number of cultural courses and activities annually.

How This Examples Reflects the TCU CAPs Model. UTTC already had a set of ILOs and accompanying objectives, in addition to a process to assess them. However, they actively moved to center their assessment efforts on gathering data that would allow them to improve their programming and resources to better support students' development in areas that aligned with students' own ideas of success. Beginning this process by conducting a survey to gauge students' ideas of success was a key first step. Through a student-centered definition of success, UTTC was able to identify an ILO that aligned with this definition. Led by the IR team, UTTC took action to create and implement an assessment instrument that would provide meaningful data in regard to how the institution was supporting students' development in relation to how students viewed success, which includes a cultural dimension.

Implementation Status and Next Steps. The student survey measuring Personal and Social Responsibility that accounts for the student-centered definition of success is being refined, with the goal of implementing it as a pre- and post-survey to guide institutional programming and measure students' progress related to this ILO over the course of their enrollment.

Challenges and Opportunities. One of the challenges UTTC is currently grappling with has come from feedback received from their accreditation agency stating that the student survey would be considered an indirect, rather than a direct, form of assessment, meaning it could not stand on its own as an approach to co-curricular assessment. Given that the student survey is designed to measure

students' development in relation to factors students deem important to their success, UTTC intends to continue refining the tool and plans to implement it again in the near future.

Conclusion

Currently, there is minimal published literature available that includes examples of institutional-level cultural outcomes at TCUs or ways that these outcomes are assessed, much less how these outcomes are assessed using Indigenous approaches. However, this landscape analysis addresses that gap and provides insight into how the conceptualization of assessment has progressed at TCUs and how TCUs are emerging in their development of culturally grounded assessment practices to actualize their cultural missions. This landscape analysis features contemporary examples of emerging CAPs initiatives at four TCUs: Turtle Mountain Community College, Nebraska Indian Community College, Institute for American Indian Arts, and United Tribes Technical College. This research also offers a "5 + 5" CAPs model consisting of five steps and five characteristics for the effective development of culturally grounded assessment practices at TCUs based on TCU experiences.

This research identified five key steps for TCUs to take to effectively develop their own unique culturally grounded assessment approaches:

- Developing cultural learning goals at the institutional level to support their TCU's mission.
- Designing an approach to achieve cultural learning goals through academic and/or co-curricular programming (often looks like a pilot followed by broad adoption).
- Designing and implementing an assessment and data collection approach to measure progress towards the cultural learning goals (often looks like a pilot followed by broad adoption).
- Securing the necessary information technology and systems for data collection and reporting, and training staff to use these systems; and ensuring these systems are widely adopted by staff and faculty. (A TCU's learning management system (LMS) or learning platform often plays a key role.).
- Forming a committee and process to reflect on what is learned from the data gathering and assessment and to decide how to apply it back to realizing cultural goals through programming.

Through these steps, TCUs can take an active role in supporting the sustainability of their institutions by building assessment approaches that work for them and ensure they are continuing to progress in actualizing their cultural goals and missions (Karlberg, 2010; Merdanian, 2015). In addition, this research has documented five defining characteristics of effective culturally grounded assessment practices at TCUs: place-based, communal and participatory, learning-focused, action-oriented, and contributory. Together, these steps and defining characteristics reveal a "5 + 5" TCU CAPs model, grounded in TCU experience, that TCUs can reference as a guide as they build out their own culturally grounded assessment approaches.

Implications for the College Fund

Based on the findings from this study, TCUs are emerging in their development of culturally grounded assessment practices and need more resources to advance and deepen this work. All TCUs reference culture in their mission statements, most TCUs have articulated cultural objectives in their strategic plans and institutional outcomes, some TCUs have designed their own culturally grounded assessment approaches, and very few TCUs have affirmed their culturally grounded assessment practices by sharing them with the broader TCU community. To better understand how the College Fund can support TCUs in developing and strengthening their CAPs, we held a listening session with the TCU staff engaged in the interviews for this report. Based on what we learned from that discussion and

through our ongoing conversations with TCU staff involved in CAPs work, we learned that the following points should be taken into consideration as we plan for how to best support TCUs in this space:

- Because TCUs are at different stages of developing and implementing a culturally grounded assessment process at their colleges, they would benefit from a program that would provide training and support around certain core elements of the CAPs model that we have documented in this report and that align with where they are in their work.
- Effective culturally grounded assessment requires a holistic look at cultural outcomes and the ways students are culturally supported in academic (curricular) and non-academic (co-curricular) programming at their colleges.
- Faculty and staff engagement and training should be included in the program design. TCUs noted the importance of building a learning culture around their culturally grounded assessment process and ensuring faculty and staff are engaged and trained in the skills they need to actively participate. They noted that this is a long-term process and depends on faculty buy-in.
- A program should include funding and support for cross-TCU site visits so that TCUs can see how each other are approaching this work. It should also fund and support convenings where TCU staff working on these initiatives can come together, share knowledge, and learn from each other away from their daily work demands.
- TCUs need support working with accreditation organizations like HLC and the Northwest Commission to help them understand TCU cultural mission and assessment practices; and together come up with ways of measuring cultural outcomes that serve TCU needs and meet accreditation requirements.

The work that TCUs have been engaged in around CAPs serves as inspiring examples of what is possible in this space. The College Fund has an opportunity to support TCUs in their CAPs work by highlighting how assessment can support TCU sustainability and help TCUs actualize their cultural missions. The College Fund can do this by sharing the approach and defining characteristics of effective CAPs development at TCUs as identified through this research (the “5 + 5” TCU CAPs model), and spotlighting TCUs that are developing tangible practices in this space. Furthermore, through designing programming and securing funding that aligns with the points identified above, the College Fund can offer valuable support for TCUs who would like to actualize their cultural missions through advancing their CAPs work.

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