



Expanding the Circle: Insights from Indigenous Engagement

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IPA Indigenous
Philanthropy
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BACKGROUND

Who is the MacArthur Foundation?

Founded in 1978, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation is a private foundation that is committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. The Foundation does this by boldly investing in creative solutions to urgent challenges, including work on a few “big bets” that strive towards transformative change in areas of profound concern, maintaining long-term commitments to its hometown of Chicago and journalism and media, and by supporting creative leadership through a range of philanthropic approaches and tools.

Since its inception, the Foundation has had the opportunity to engage in several issue areas including human rights, mental health, the environment and climate change, community and economic development, journalism and media, and organizational capacity building, to name a few. Headquartered in Chicago, the MacArthur Foundation has worked in communities across the United States and in more than 117 countries around the world.¹

Increasing Engagement with Indigenous Communities: Why now?²

For the past four decades, the MacArthur Foundation has provided funding to Indigenous communities through fellowships, grants and program related investments. These contributions have fostered significant initiatives and driven positive change across a range of areas, including strengthening Native American higher education institutions and economic development organizations, promoting Indigenous self-determination, advancing conservation and sustainable development, and supporting Indigenous arts.

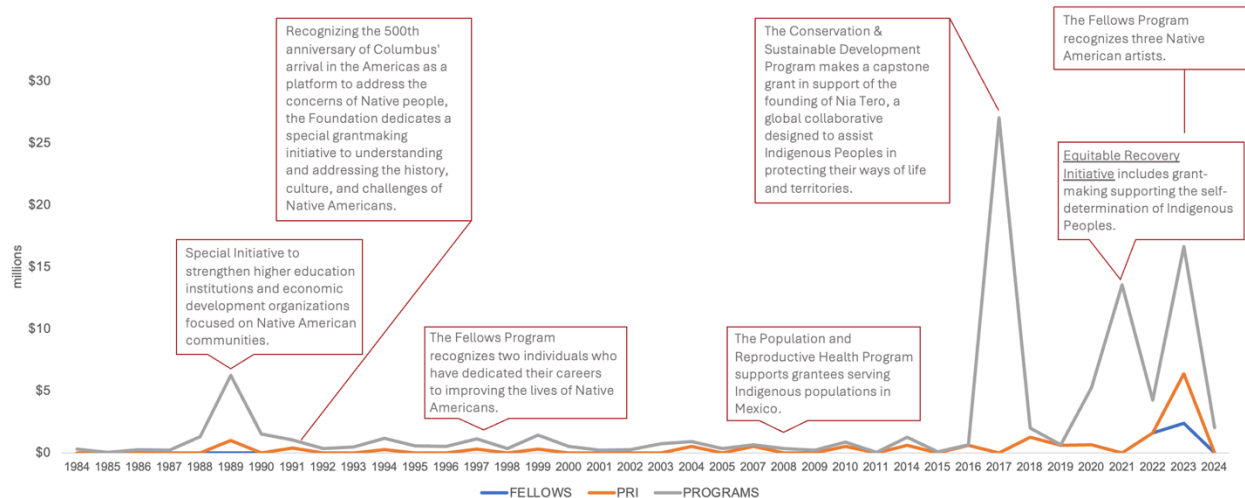
However, much of this support has responded to specific opportunities rather than being part of a cohesive, strategic approach to advancing Native wellbeing. In 2023, the Foundation began a journey to more deeply reflect on its impact and explore

¹ To learn more about the history of the MacArthur Foundation and its founders, visit: <https://www.macfound.org/about/our-history/>

² A note on terminology: we use “Native” to refer to Native Americans, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians, and “Indigenous” to refer to Native Peoples within and beyond the United States.

pathways for greater alignment with Indigenous priorities. Through this work, the Foundation is exploring the opportunity to consider a more intentional strategy that centers Indigenous self-determination, cultural revitalization and sustainable development.

TABLE 1 – MacArthur Fellowships, Grants, and PRIs Supporting Indigenous and Native American Communities: 1984 – 2024



The Process of Expanding the Circle

From April 24–26, 2024, the Foundation held its first convening in Minneapolis with 20 Native leaders from across the United States, where they explored the question, *“What is in place in 2034 that shows MacArthur’s alliance and partnership with Indigenous communities has been meaningful and effective?”*

The ensuing discussion surfaced several critical and interconnected areas of potential focus, including:

- **Land and Language** as being central to Indigenous people’s identity, communities, and foundational elements of culture, education, lifeways, health and wellbeing.
- **Indigenous Agency and Autonomy** to have the resources required to respond to community needs without having to ask permission.

- **Recognition of Sovereign Rights** focused on ownership and protection of languages, data, organizations, lands, media outlets, infrastructure and intellectual property.
- **Community Power Building** is needed to create a reflective, responsive policy environment that meets the needs of Indigenous Peoples.

Grateful for the wisdom shared at the gathering and committed to sustaining momentum toward a more intentional strategy for supporting Native wellbeing, the MacArthur Foundation engaged Indigenous Philanthropy Advisors (IPA)³ to broaden the circle of Indigenous voices.

THE OVERSTORY: A CANOPY OF INDIGENOUS WHOLENESS

Introduction

Since the fall of 2024, IPA has conducted 24 interviews with Indigenous community leaders, including traditional knowledge holders, academics, artists, scientists, and entrepreneurs, among others. Through this process IPA listened deeply to the stories, wisdom, and aspirations that were shared. These conversations revealed powerful themes and insights about resilience, connection, and the transformative potential of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

IPA has woven these lessons and the themes that emerged in the April Gathering into a narrative titled *“The Overstory: A Canopy of Indigenous Wholeness”* – a story that honors the voices of those engaged and illuminates a path towards collective understanding and wholeness. To complement the story, an appendix was created to share the key themes that emerged from each of the interview questions, providing a deeper look into the conversations that shaped this work.⁴

The Overstory: A Canopy of Indigenous Wholeness

In the vast and intricate forest of human endeavors, the overstory—the dominant narrative shaping Indigenous communities and their intersections with broader society—unfolds as a canopy of empowerment, renewal, and interconnectedness. Beneath this expansive canopy lies a story of resilience, where self-determination

³ Indigenous Philanthropy Advisors: <https://www.indigenous-philanthropy.com>

⁴ See Appendix A: Summary of Interview Responses

and cultural revival flourish, nurturing an understory rich with individual agency, grassroots innovation, and transformative systemic efforts. This interconnected ecosystem reflects the profound strength and ingenuity driving Indigenous communities toward a future rooted in heritage and thriving with possibility.

The Canopy: A Commitment to Identity and Cultural Continuity

At the heart of this overstory lies a deep-rooted connection to cultural and linguistic revitalization—a lifeline that weaves together history, identity, and collective purpose. Just as the tallest trees in a forest create a canopy that shelters and nurtures the life beneath, Indigenous efforts to preserve, reclaim, and adapt cultural practices and languages provide the foundational support for communities to thrive. These efforts act as both shield and sustenance, protecting against the erosive forces of colonialism while fostering growth in the face of contemporary challenges.

Revitalizing language and culture is more than a preservation effort; it is an act of empowerment and self-determination. Language is the vessel of worldview, carrying ancestral knowledge, spiritual teachings, and communal values. It connects generations, transcending time and space to anchor individuals and communities in a shared sense of belonging. For Indigenous Peoples, reclaiming and celebrating these practices not only reaffirms their identity but also strengthens their resilience in the face of global crises, such as climate change and systemic inequality.

This commitment is inherently adaptive, acknowledging the need to balance tradition with innovation. Whether through digital tools to teach endangered languages, integrating Indigenous art forms into contemporary media, or creating spaces where ceremony and modern governance coalesce, these efforts reflect the ingenuity and vibrancy of Indigenous cultures. They transform historical trauma into a source of strength, reframing narratives of survival into stories of thriving futures.

Ultimately, this commitment ensures that Indigenous identity remains central to the global discourse. It fosters pride, continuity, and unity among community members, empowering them to address challenges and opportunities in ways that honor their roots while embracing the dynamic nature of the modern world. Just as the forest canopy shapes the environment for all that grows beneath it, the revitalization of Indigenous culture and identity shapes the future, offering a model of interconnected flourishing for the broader world.

The Tree Trunks: Leadership and Advocacy

The canopy is supported by towering trunks of leadership and advocacy, which anchor efforts to amplify Indigenous voices in decision-making spaces. These leaders serve as both architects and stewards of change, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge, values, and priorities inform and guide the systems that impact their communities. Whether through governance, education, philanthropy, or sustainable economic initiatives, Indigenous leaders are driving transformations that challenge entrenched inequities and build pathways toward justice and inclusion.

Leadership takes many forms—from elected officials championing policy reforms that uphold Indigenous sovereignty, to community advocates fostering grassroots movements for cultural and environmental preservation. In education, leaders are redefining curricula to center Indigenous histories and ways of knowing, while in philanthropy, they are reshaping funding models to prioritize trust-based, community-led approaches. In sustainable economic initiatives, Indigenous entrepreneurs and visionaries are creating innovative solutions that align with traditional values, such as circular economies and regenerative practices, which honor the interconnectedness of all life.

These leaders embody the principles of equity, representation, and systemic change, often navigating the complexities of bridging traditional governance systems with contemporary frameworks. Their advocacy nurtures an ecosystem where Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives are not merely included as a token gesture but are elevated and centered as essential foundations for progress. By fostering inclusivity in decision-making, these advocates dismantle the structural barriers that have historically excluded Indigenous voices and build spaces where their contributions are celebrated and valued.

This leadership also extends to intergenerational mentorship, where seasoned advocates invest in emerging leaders to ensure continuity and resilience. They prioritize creating spaces for youth to step into leadership roles, equipping the next generation with the tools, confidence, and networks necessary to sustain and expand their communities' progress. Through their tireless efforts, these leaders serve as the sturdy trunks that support the canopy of Indigenous empowerment, providing a solid foundation for collective growth and transformation.

The Branches: Resilience and Innovation

Resilience—born of historical and ongoing challenges—forms the adaptive branches of the overstory, extending across generations and geographies. Rooted in the profound strength of ancestral knowledge and cultural wisdom, these branches demonstrate the remarkable ability of Indigenous communities to adapt and thrive despite centuries of colonial disruption, systemic marginalization, and structural inequities. The resilience of Indigenous peoples is not merely about survival; it is a dynamic, forward-thinking process that transforms adversity into opportunity, shaping a future of empowerment and renewal.

Indigenous communities are leveraging a range of modern tools to address entrenched systemic barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and environmental degradation. Technology has become a key instrument of innovation, enabling the preservation of Indigenous languages through apps, the sharing of cultural narratives through digital storytelling, and the enhancement of education through online platforms tailored to Indigenous contexts. At the same time, innovative funding models are creating pathways for financial sovereignty. From community-driven crowdfunding campaigns to Indigenous-led impact investment funds, these approaches align financial support with cultural values, ensuring that resources flow to initiatives rooted in self-determination and sustainability.

These adaptive branches are further strengthened by the integration of traditional knowledge with contemporary practices. For example, land stewardship practices that have sustained ecosystems for millennia are now informing climate resilience strategies and sustainable development projects. Indigenous leaders are at the forefront of creating green energy solutions, such as solar-powered microgrids and renewable energy cooperatives, which simultaneously address environmental justice and economic empowerment.

Resilience also manifests in the reimagining of governance and education systems. Indigenous communities are establishing schools that incorporate traditional teachings alongside modern curricula, fostering a holistic understanding of the world that prepares the next generation to lead with confidence and cultural integrity. Advocacy for policy reform and representation in decision-making spaces ensures that Indigenous voices shape laws and systems affecting their lives.

These branches of resilience flex and grow, constantly evolving to bridge the past and future through ingenuity and determination. They symbolize the transformative

power of Indigenous innovation—an unwavering commitment to reframe challenges as catalysts for growth, to reclaim agency, and to build ecosystems of support that honor both heritage and progress. Through these efforts, Indigenous communities not only endure but lead, offering lessons in adaptability, creativity, and collective strength that resonate far beyond their own boundaries.

The Network of Roots: Partnership and Collaboration

The overstory's roots extend deeply into the soil of partnership and collaboration, forming an intricate and resilient network that sustains and nurtures the entire ecosystem. These roots symbolize the interconnected relationships forged between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, organizations, and allies, each contributing to the growth and health of the larger whole. Grounded in trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect, these partnerships are not merely transactional; they are relational, evolving over time to reflect shared goals and values.

At their core, these collaborations honor Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge systems, ensuring that Indigenous voices are not only heard but actively lead the way in decision-making processes. Partnerships are built with an understanding of historical contexts and the necessity of repairing and rebalancing relationships disrupted by colonial practices. This means actively shifting power dynamics, recognizing the expertise of Indigenous communities in identifying and addressing their own needs, and ensuring that solutions are culturally aligned and community-driven.

Through these networks, resources—whether financial, material, or intellectual—flow where they are most needed, like nutrients feeding the soil. Flexible funding models, unrestricted grants, and capacity-building initiatives empower Indigenous communities to allocate resources in ways that align with their priorities, rather than external expectations. This flow of resources supports initiatives that range from cultural revitalization and language preservation to climate resilience and economic self-sufficiency, ensuring the health and sustainability of the overstory.

Partnerships also serve as bridges between diverse knowledge systems, blending traditional Indigenous teachings with contemporary tools and innovations. By integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge with modern science, for example, these collaborations address global challenges such as climate change, sustainable development, and food security. This blending of wisdoms creates solutions that are both innovative and deeply rooted in place-based understanding.

Additionally, the network of roots reflects the importance of long-term commitment. Just as roots take time to grow and strengthen, authentic partnerships require patience, consistency, and a willingness to adapt. Building trust is a gradual process, often taking years of engagement, and it demands a commitment to follow through on promises and remain accountable. This long-term approach ensures that relationships are not extractive but reciprocal, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the outcomes.

Finally, these collaborative roots extend beyond immediate partnerships to include cross-sector alliances and multi-stakeholder engagements. They connect Indigenous communities with philanthropy, governments, private industries, and other organizations, creating a web of support that amplifies impact. By aligning efforts and pooling resources, these partnerships build a foundation strong enough to sustain both the overstory and the understory, ensuring that the entire ecosystem thrives for generations to come.

The Circulatory System: Intergenerational Responsibility

The overstory draws strength from an enduring commitment to future generations, a principle deeply embedded in Indigenous worldviews. This responsibility extends across time, encompassing the wisdom of elders, the vitality of youth, and the promise of unborn generations. It acts as a circulatory system within the ecosystem, transferring knowledge, values, and resources to sustain cultural survival and community resilience. Just as a forest's roots nourish new growth while preserving the old, Indigenous communities foster intergenerational harmony by ensuring that traditions and innovations are seamlessly woven together.

Elders play a pivotal role as knowledge keepers, embodying the teachings of past generations and grounding the community in ancestral wisdom. Their guidance informs decision-making processes, ensuring cultural protocols and values remain central. Meanwhile, youth are nurtured not only as future leaders but as active participants in the present. Initiatives in education, mentorship, and skill-building empower them to carry the torch forward, adapting traditions to modern contexts and addressing emerging challenges such as climate change, technological advances, and social inequities.

Programs in governance and community-building act as seeds from which new forests of opportunity grow. Language revitalization efforts, for example, reconnect younger generations with their heritage, reinforcing identity and fostering pride.

Investments in youth councils, intergenerational storytelling, and skill development create a framework for long-term leadership that aligns with both traditional and contemporary realities.

This intergenerational responsibility is not limited to the transfer of tangible resources but also includes the cultivation of relational and spiritual connections. Through ceremonies, land-based teachings, and shared experiences, communities ensure that each generation is rooted in a sense of purpose, belonging, and accountability to the collective well-being. By focusing on sustainability and continuity, Indigenous communities are building foundational infrastructures—such as sustainable economies, culturally relevant education systems, and resilient governance structures—that can support future generations while honoring the past.

Ultimately, this enduring commitment to intergenerational responsibility creates a dynamic and thriving ecosystem where the past, present, and future coexist in harmony, each reinforcing the other. This approach ensures that as one generation passes its wisdom, another takes root, continuing the cycle of growth and renewal that sustains the canopy of Indigenous empowerment.

The Shadows Beneath: Systemic Challenges

The overstory, while offering protection and sustenance, also casts shadows where systemic challenges persist, shaping the environment in complex ways. These shadows manifest as entrenched issues like health inequities, economic exclusion, climate change, and the enduring impacts of colonialism. Indigenous communities often find themselves at the intersection of these challenges, grappling with their effects while leading efforts to dismantle the systems that perpetuate them.

Health inequities, rooted in historical trauma, inadequate infrastructure, and systemic neglect, create disparities in access to healthcare, mental health support, and basic resources. Indigenous leaders are reimagining healthcare systems that integrate traditional healing practices with modern medicine, emphasizing the interconnectedness of physical, spiritual, and community well-being. This holistic approach seeks not only to address immediate health concerns but also to heal the deeper wounds caused by colonization and marginalization.

Economic exclusion, another pervasive shadow, limits access to wealth-building opportunities and sustainable livelihoods. Indigenous leaders are actively developing community-based economic models that circulate wealth locally, prioritize

sustainability, and align with cultural values. From Indigenous-led businesses to cooperative models in green energy and agriculture, these initiatives aim to build generational wealth while reclaiming economic agency. By addressing systemic barriers like discriminatory lending practices and lack of access to capital, Indigenous communities are crafting pathways to economic self-sufficiency.

Climate change casts perhaps the longest shadow, threatening lands, waters, and traditional ways of life that have sustained Indigenous peoples for millennia. Yet, Indigenous leaders are at the forefront of global efforts to combat this crisis. Drawing on traditional ecological knowledge and innovative practices, they advocate for sustainable resource stewardship, climate-resilient infrastructure, and renewable energy solutions. Indigenous communities are not merely adapting to these changes but also offering transformative strategies to protect and heal the Earth, demonstrating that their knowledge systems are vital to global sustainability.

Central to these efforts is the dismantling of colonial structures that have perpetuated these shadows. Policies and systems rooted in extractive practices and unequal power dynamics are being replaced with frameworks that prioritize Indigenous sovereignty, equity, and self-determination. Indigenous leaders emphasize the importance of community-centric definitions of success—measures that value cultural revitalization, intergenerational well-being, and environmental harmony over conventional Western metrics like GDP or profit margins.

Through these actions, Indigenous leaders are turning systemic challenges into opportunities for transformation. By addressing the shadows with intentionality and vision, they illuminate a path toward a future where well-being, empowerment, and sustainability are no longer aspirations, but realities woven into the fabric of their communities and beyond. This journey is a testament to resilience, creativity, and the power of Indigenous knowledge systems to guide us all toward a brighter horizon.

Personal Narratives as the Forest's Storytelling

Personal stories are the lifeblood of Indigenous communities, deeply embedded within the canopy of the overstory and woven into its very essence. These narratives serve as the rings within the tree trunk, capturing and preserving histories of resilience, transformation, and triumph in a way that bridges past, present, and future. Each story reflects a unique perspective, shaped by lived experiences, cultural heritage, and the ongoing struggle against systemic challenges.

Storytelling is not merely a recounting of events; it is a powerful tool for education, healing, and advocacy. Within Indigenous communities, stories carry the wisdom of ancestors, the teachings of elders, and the dreams of future generations. They become vessels of cultural knowledge, instilling values of reciprocity, stewardship, and interconnectedness while fostering a shared sense of identity and purpose.

Through storytelling, Indigenous leaders and community members amplify their voices and connect their experiences to broader movements for justice, equity, and inclusion. These stories illuminate systemic inequities, such as economic exclusion, health disparities, and the impacts of climate change, while offering pathways to resilience and innovation. They foster empathy and understanding, dismantling stereotypes and challenging colonial narratives that have historically marginalized Indigenous perspectives.

Personal narratives also inspire action, serving as catalysts for change at both individual and systemic levels. Whether shared through oral traditions, written works, digital media, or public speaking, these stories engage audiences, spark critical conversations, and mobilize allies. They illustrate the profound impact of centering Indigenous knowledge and leadership in addressing global challenges, from climate resilience to sustainable development.

In the broader context of the overstory, these narratives act as connective tissue, linking the systemic shadows of oppression to the light of hope and renewal. They remind us that each individual story is a part of a greater whole, contributing to the collective resilience and brilliance of Indigenous communities. By honoring and amplifying these voices, society can better understand the complexities of the challenges faced and the innovative solutions forged by Indigenous peoples, ensuring that their wisdom and experiences shape the understory of thriving futures.

The Vision of a Thriving Understory

Beneath this canopy, the understory teems with life—a mosaic of community-led initiatives, youth programs, cultural practices, and sustainable economic models. The themes of reciprocity, decolonization, and long-term vision provide the nutrients for this understory to thrive. This overstory ensures that the foundational principles of care, respect, and collaboration permeate every ecosystem layer by centering Indigenous agency and knowledge.

This overstory, a living, breathing metaphor, invites society to look upward, learn from its lessons, and align with its vision of interconnected flourishing. Hope and renewal grow stronger below it, building an inclusive and sustainable future for generations to come.

Appendix A: Summary of Interview Responses

The purpose of this appendix is to summarize the key themes that emerged from interviews with 24 Indigenous leaders, including traditional knowledge holders, academics, artists, scientists, and entrepreneurs, to name a few. These interviews were guided by 10 questions, though not every participant addressed all of them. Instead, the discussions were fluid, allowing participants to share their insights and experiences in a way that naturally intertwined multiple themes.

The themes presented in this appendix are organized by the guiding questions to provide a structured view of the insights shared. This approach allows for deeper exploration of the diverse perspectives, while honoring the interconnected and holistic nature of the conversations.

QUESTION 1: Can you share a bit about yourself and the roles you play in your community?

Commitment to Community and Identity

- Deep connection to cultural, linguistic, and land-based revitalization efforts.
- Active engagement in maintaining and strengthening Indigenous identity and traditions within modern contexts.
- Acknowledgement of personal heritage as a foundation for community-focused work.

Leadership and Advocacy

- Leadership roles in promoting representation and voice in decision-making spaces (politics, philanthropy, education, and/or finance).
- Advocacy for systemic changes, such as increased funding for Indigenous-led initiatives, better access to resources, and policy reform.
- A focus on creating spaces where Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems are central.

Intergenerational Responsibility

- Emphasis on supporting and mentoring the next generation through education, mentorship, or youth-focused initiatives.
- Acknowledgment of responsibilities to elders and community members, often informed by familial and cultural values.
- Building foundational infrastructure for future generations in language, governance, and sustainable economies.

Resilience and Innovation

- Innovative approaches to addressing challenges, including creating new funding models, educational tools, and businesses tailored to Indigenous contexts.
- Use of modern tools (e.g., technology, media) to promote cultural continuity and community development.
- Resilience in overcoming personal and systemic barriers, such as limited funding, discrimination, or lack of existing infrastructure.

Partnership and Collaboration

- Strong focus on relationship building as a core strategy for community success.
- Collaborations with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies to build capacity and resources.
- Seeking long-term partnerships that align with community priorities and values.

Focus on Systemic Challenges

- Recognition of barriers such as poverty, systemic racism, health inequities, and economic exclusion.
- Efforts to address systemic gaps, particularly in philanthropy, finance, and education, with scalable solutions that reflect Indigenous needs.
- Balancing traditional knowledge with contemporary tools to address global challenges like climate change and sustainable development.

Personal Stories as Catalysts for Action

- Personal narratives of family, heritage, and lived experience serve as driving forces for their work.
- Reflections on transformative moments, whether through education, activism, or professional experiences, shape their roles in their communities.
- They use storytelling to inspire others and emphasize the broader context of their work.

Overall, this question surfaced a collective narrative that showcases diverse but interconnected efforts to build more inclusive, empowered, and sustainable futures for Indigenous peoples.

QUESTION 2: When envisioning thriving Native communities, what are the key elements or features that come to mind?

Cultural Revitalization and Identity:

- Language and cultural practices are foundational to community health.
- Support for traditional knowledge holders and language speakers.
- The ability to adapt culture and language for modern contexts while honoring ancestral ways.

Self-Determination and Sovereignty:

- Communities lead their programs and define success on their own terms.
- Sovereignty is a philosophical state that is not dependent on external recognition.
- Self-determined governance and decision-making processes.

Holistic Health and Wellness:

- Physical, mental, spiritual, and community health are interconnected.
- Addressing contemporary and historical traumas as part of the healing process.
- Access to health resources, elder care, and childcare as community priorities.

Economic Self-Sufficiency:

- Creating generational wealth and supporting Indigenous-led businesses.
- Developing community-based economies that circulate wealth locally.
- Culturally relevant economic development tied to sustainability.

Freedom and Empowerment:

- Moving beyond resilience narratives rooted in trauma to envision hope and thriving futures.
- Reducing barriers to participation in cultural, social, and economic activities.
- Celebrating pride in identity and breaking free from colonial mindsets.

Reciprocity and Relationship-Building:

- Trust-based philanthropy and long-term investments in community solutions.
- Building partnerships that respect Indigenous knowledge and ways of being.
- Communities are experts of their own needs, with funders acting as supportive allies.

Intergenerational Harmony:

- Strengthening connections between Elders and youth through storytelling and shared knowledge.
- Creating opportunities for all generations to participate in cultural and community life.
- Addressing barriers in technology, resources, and understanding.

Infrastructure and Support Systems:

- Access to safe housing, reliable transportation, and other essential life resources.
- Systems designed for intergenerational and communal living.
- Investing in education and opportunities that keep families connected to their land and culture.

Environmental and Resource Stewardship:

- Reconnecting with and stewarding land, water, and air through Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Balancing traditional teachings with innovation to create sustainable futures.
- Climate-resilient infrastructure for food, energy, and water security.

Decolonization and Healing:

- Reclaiming identity, culture, and governance structures.
- Breaking free from colonial frameworks and rebuilding Indigenous systems of care.
- Recognizing the importance of ceremony, tradition, and spiritual connection.

Community-Centric Definitions of Success:

- Communities define their own metrics of success rooted in their needs and aspirations.
- Policies and philanthropic practices should address disparities and empower Native voices.
- Supporting the visibility and agency of urban and rural Native communities alike.

Care and Healing Themes

- Healing is seen as both a personal and collective journey, addressing past traumas while fostering hope.
- Care involves nurturing mental, spiritual, and physical well-being, supported by intergenerational mentorship and collaboration.
- Love, self-care, and acknowledging historical and ongoing challenges are central to envisioning thriving communities.

This vision shifts from survival to thriving, centering Indigenous agency, relationships, and culturally-aligned approaches to build a sustainable and hopeful future.

QUESTION 3: How does your organization currently collaborate with community members to gather their insights and understand their needs?

Relationship Building

- **Foundational to Success:** Long-term, authentic relationships built on trust, respect, and reciprocity are essential.
- **Ceremony and Cultural Anchoring:** Starting relationships in ceremony or culturally relevant practices fosters mutual respect.
- **Time and Patience:** Relationship-building processes take time, sometimes years, to gain community trust and insights.
- **Personal Connections:** Regular check-ins, in-person meetings, town halls, and gatherings help maintain and deepen relationships.
- **Individual Approach:** Relationships are built one person at a time, respecting the diversity of roles within the community (elders, youth, leaders, etc.).

Community-Driven Approaches

- **Listening First:** Effective collaboration begins with listening and learning from community members without imposing external agendas.
- **Community-Led Initiatives:** Support for Indigenous-led and designed projects ensures relevance and cultural appropriateness.
- **Regional Tailoring:** Programming is adapted to meet each community or region's specific needs and priorities.

Holistic and Multipronged Strategies

- **Interconnected Efforts:** Recognizing the layered and interconnected nature of community needs (e.g., environment, health, education).
- **Cultural Integration:** Embedding language, culture, and identity into programming fosters positive outcomes and long-term impact.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Engaging multiple stakeholders (lawyers, advocates, experts) creates comprehensive solutions.

Capacity Building

- **Education and Awareness:** Training community members and organizations on tools, approaches, and options for addressing challenges.

- **Leadership Development:** Supporting youth councils, language revitalization, and skill-building programs prepares future leaders.
- **Workforce Development:** Focus on infrastructure and workforce capacity to enable community self-sufficiency and resilience.

Accountability and Adaptation

- **Feedback Loops:** Regular communication and reporting back to communities ensure transparency and accountability.
- **Flexibility:** Adapting approaches based on ongoing feedback and the evolving needs of communities.
- **Data Sovereignty:** Respect for community-owned data systems and processes.

Overcoming Barriers

- **Navigating Institutional Structures:** Advocating for humility and service orientation within institutions to address colonial legacies.
- **Addressing Historical Trauma:** Recognizing the impact of trauma on communities and workplaces and implementing trauma-informed approaches.
- **Resource Accessibility:** Shifting from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset to ensure equitable resource distribution.

Challenges of Scaling Relationships

- **Balance of Breadth and Depth:** Balancing the need to engage widely with communities while maintaining authentic, deep connections.
- **Staffing and Representation:** Ensuring Indigenous representation at all levels (boards, staff, leadership) to drive Indigenous-led solutions.

These themes highlight the importance of centering community voices, fostering respectful partnerships, and adopting long-term, relationship-driven approaches in collaborative efforts.

QUESTION 4: What are the key elements or principles that should be included in an initiative that is aimed at supporting Native wellbeing?

Long-Term Funding:

- Multi-year grants for sustainability.
- Endowment building to ensure financial independence.

Community-Led Priorities:

- Partner with communities to define goals.
- Respect cultural protocols and governance structures.

Flexible and General Operating Support:

- Allow communities to allocate funds as needed.
- Simplify reporting requirements.

Embedded Indigenous Leadership:

- Include Indigenous leaders in decision-making and program delivery.
- Train and onboard philanthropic staff with cultural competency.

Healing and Holistic Well-Being:

- Incorporate mental, spiritual, and physical health into initiatives.
- Create spaces for collective healing and grief work.

Equity in Staff Support:

- Fair wages, benefits, and well-being resources for staff.
- Support for volunteers transitioning to paid roles.

Partnerships and Collaboration:

- Work with experienced organizations.
- Balance building internal capacity with external partnerships.

Cultural and Language Preservation:

- Prioritize language revitalization and cultural practices.
- Align initiatives with the intrinsic values of Indigenous communities.

Accountability Structures:

- Establish clear, reciprocal accountability to Indigenous stakeholders.

- Avoid extractive practices.

Generational Thinking:

- Focus on building solutions that benefit future generations.
- Align timelines and metrics with long-term goals.

Intersectional Approaches:

- Recognize the interconnectedness of challenges like justice, food security, and climate resilience.
- Support holistic solutions addressing multiple issues.

Transparent Intentions:

- Articulate "why" the initiative is being undertaken and its intended impact.
- Center community benefits over institutional image.

By integrating these principles, an initiative aimed at Native well-being can create a meaningful, sustainable, and community-centered impact.

QUESTION 5: How would you like to see this initiative designed to best serve your community's needs?

Relationship Building

- Emphasis on authentic relationships rather than transactional interactions.
- Opportunities for funders, strategists, and practitioners to connect as individuals.
- Intermediaries as critical bridges between communities and funders.
- Building trust through long-term engagement and consistency.

Community-Led and Needs-Based Design

- Programs and funding decisions should be designed by and for the community.
- Recognition of community sovereignty in determining needs and success.

- Supporting grassroots efforts across the ecosystem rather than focusing solely on flagship projects.

Long-Term Commitment

- Need for at least a 10-year commitment to see meaningful impact.
- Moving away from "wishy-washy" funding cycles that lack sustainability.

Flexibility in Funding

- Unrestricted grants and minimal paperwork to reduce administrative burdens.
- Provisions for oral applications or culturally responsive processes.
- Ensuring communities can allocate funds where they are most needed without external micromanagement.

Capacity Building

- Supporting training programs for educators, community leaders, and other key roles.
- Investing in tools and resources that allow for scaling up successful initiatives.
- Focus on increasing community capacity rather than solely funding projects.

Equity and Accessibility

- Addressing systemic barriers like lack of grant-writing resources in Indigenous communities.
- Proactive steps to reduce barriers in application and reporting processes.
- Designing metrics and evaluation tools in collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Sustainability

- Focus on initiatives that create long-term value, such as clean energy projects and economic development.
- Use of innovative financial tools like low-cost financing, loan guarantees, and impact investments.
- Capital transfer as a means to enable self-sufficiency.

Respect for Indigenous Knowledge and Systems

- Valuing traditional governance and worldviews, which often surpass Western systems in sophistication.
- Building partnerships that respect cultural knowledge, ceremonies, and teachings.
- Moving beyond stereotypes and demonstrating trust in Indigenous peoples' ability to manage resources effectively.

Holistic and Intergenerational Impact

- Programs should span sectors (education, energy, economic development) and focus on intergenerational outcomes.
- Inclusion of youth, women, and underrepresented groups in program design and execution.

Trust-Based Philanthropy

- Funders are taking the time to understand and champion Indigenous-led work.
- Supporting leaders with financial and social resources to unlock their potential.
- Encouraging funders to advocate within their networks for Indigenous priorities.

Ideal Initiative Design to Serve Community Needs:

- **Relational Framework:** Build initiatives that prioritize personal connections and trust. Include immersive, land-based gatherings that focus on personal well-being and collective visioning.
- **Unrestricted Support:** Provide flexible funding with minimal restrictions, allowing communities to define and pursue their own goals.
- **Capacity and Leadership Development:** Establish cohorts of Indigenous leaders with paid opportunities to develop and implement innovative ideas.
- **Scalable Solutions:** Invest in programs that address systemic barriers and allow for scaling successful models, particularly in education and clean energy.
- **Culturally Responsive Processes:** Ensure application and reporting processes are accessible and culturally aligned, including options like oral applications.

- **Long-Term Vision:** Commit to long-term support (10+ years) to enable sustainable impact and systemic change.
- **Advocacy and Education for Funders:** Encourage funders to immerse themselves in community contexts and act as advocates within broader networks.

The initiative can align with community needs by weaving these elements into program design while fostering meaningful, sustainable relationships and outcomes.

QUESTION 6: On the flip side, what types of initiatives might not resonate well within your community?

What doesn't work:

Top-Down, Prescriptive Models

- Projects designed without community input or imposed solutions.
- "Savior" approaches that assume external expertise is superior.

Short-Term or Transactional Commitments

- Temporary, high-impact projects without long-term engagement.
- Lack of relationship building or sustained partnerships.

Deficit-Based Framing

- Focusing solely on community challenges or problems without recognizing strengths and assets.

Cumbersome Processes

- Heavy reporting requirements and administrative tasks.
- Rigid timelines and inflexible approaches.

Exclusionary Practices

- Lack of representation or involvement from all parts of the community.
- Overreliance on "shiny stars" without supporting grassroots leaders.

Over-Reliance on Non-Indigenous Consultants

- Outsourcing expertise to consultants who lack cultural understanding or lived experience.

Non-Reciprocal Engagement

- Extractive practices where communities provide input but see no follow-up or shared outcomes.

Performance-Based Funding

- Forcing communities to "perform" or adapt to external expectations to secure funding.

Short Timelines or One-Size-Fits-All Approaches

- Limited timelines that don't accommodate the community's pace and processes.
- Standardized templates for reporting or project design that don't reflect cultural nuances.

What does work:

Trust and Relationships

- Importance of building and sustaining long-term relationships.
- Relationships require time and effort to build trust, which is fragile and crucial.
- Accountability and follow-through on commitments are key to trust-building.

Respect for Community-led Solutions

- Imposed models or solutions do not work; communities know their needs best.
- Community-led and culturally aligned approaches are vital for sustainability.
- Indigenous knowledge and expertise should guide initiatives.

Strength-Based Approaches

- Avoid deficit-based narratives; focus on strengths and resilience.
- Invest in community capabilities and amplify their strengths rather than their challenges.

Cultural Competence and Representation

- Representation of Indigenous voices in decision-making and project leadership is essential.
- Non-Indigenous leaders or consultants may lack the necessary cultural understanding.

Transparency and Flexibility

- Clear and transparent processes are needed to build trust.
- Adaptability to changing circumstances and longer-term commitments (10+ years) are preferred.

Avoiding Burdensome Practices

- Excessive reporting requirements and administrative burdens are counterproductive.
- Simplified and flexible processes enable greater focus on impactful work.

Commitment to Reciprocity

- Respect for the time and contributions of community members (e.g., paying for their time).
- Reciprocal sharing of outcomes and resources when community input is sought.

Valuing Process Over End Goals

- Processes of collaboration and listening are as important as achieving outcomes.
- Respect for traditional governance and community decision-making structures.

To resonate with Indigenous communities, initiatives should prioritize relationships, respect for cultural practices, and long-term, flexible, and strength-based approaches. Recognizing community expertise and aligning values with Indigenous priorities are critical for meaningful and sustainable impact.

QUESTION 7: How can the Foundation ensure that the initiative that is developed is respectful of and honors the cultural traditions and protocols of your community?

Engage Indigenous Leadership and Traditional Knowledge Holders

- Collaborate with Indigenous leaders and traditional knowledge holders to develop programs.
- Traditional knowledge holders provide guidance on cultural protocols and community values.
- Representation must include voices from diverse Indigenous groups, including Alaska and Hawaii.

Build Genuine Relationships

- Spend time in communities to understand their needs and cultural practices.
- Establish reciprocal relationships by listening and learning from the community.
- Relationships should be rooted in respect, humility, and a willingness to adapt.

Center Indigenous Knowledge and Ways of Being

- Include language, ceremony, and cultural practices in initiatives.
- Respect sacred traditions and avoid stereotyping or homogenizing protocols.
- Support Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

Long-Term Commitment and Reflection

- Be in it for the long haul and admit when things aren't working.
- Reflect on and reimagine power structures to ensure equitable partnerships.
- Acknowledge the importance of internal work within the foundation to align with Indigenous values.

Reciprocity and Shared Responsibility

- Approach work with a spirit of reciprocity—offering and receiving in balance.

- Understand that the relationship transforms both parties involved.
- Be clear about intentions and agreements to avoid misunderstandings.

Flexibility and Cultural Sensitivity

- Avoid mandatory gatherings during culturally significant days.
- Take time to learn and respect unique community protocols, recognizing that traditions vary widely.
- Create initiatives that honor the diversity of Indigenous experiences.

Community-Led Approaches

- Empower communities to lead, ensuring Indigenous voices deliver and shape the work.
- Trust Indigenous-led and governed organizations to follow proper protocols.
- Share foundation intentions transparently to foster trust and collaboration.

Personal and Institutional Vulnerability

- Acknowledge gaps in knowledge and approach the work with humility.
- Spend meaningful time (e.g., 4+ days) in communities to better understand their ways of knowing and being.
- Be open to change and embrace the transformative nature of engaging with Indigenous communities.

Practical and Symbolic Support

- Provide resources like food and basic respect when engaging with communities.
- Avoid checkbox exercises; ensure the initiative genuinely intends to support cultural revitalization.
- Recognize that the hard work behind these efforts is rarely glamorous but deeply meaningful.

Clear Communication and Accountability

- Share foundation values, mission, and intentions in a concise, accessible manner.
- Maintain open communication channels, checking in early and often.

- Be transparent about limitations to avoid causing harm or false expectations.

These themes emphasize thoughtful, reciprocal, and transformative approaches to working with Indigenous communities, ensuring cultural respect and honoring protocols while building trust and long-term relationships.

QUESTION 8: Are there any concerns or considerations regarding the ethical aspects that we should be aware of as the initiative is being developed?

Data Sovereignty

- Emphasis on community ownership of data and avoiding extractive practices.
- Policies and practices should align with community needs.
- Transparency and accountability regarding how data is used and shared.

Partnerships and Relationships

- The importance of thoughtful partnerships that respect Indigenous governance and values.
- Ensuring equitable power dynamics and relational accountability.
- Avoiding extractive collaborations and fostering mutual benefit.

Intellectual Property and Ownership

- Protection of Indigenous intellectual property, culture, and traditions.
- Respecting traditional knowledge and ensuring it is not exploited.
- Innovative approaches to navigate legal systems while upholding Indigenous ownership.

Funding Ethics

- Ensuring funding aligns with Indigenous values and governance processes.
- Awareness of the origins of funding and its potential impacts on Indigenous communities.
- Ethical sourcing of funds to avoid perpetuating harm to Indigenous people.

Cultural Respect and Reciprocity

- Recognizing and valuing Indigenous culture, language, and ceremonies.
- Centering Indigenous perspectives and promoting the resurgence of traditions.
- Holding space for diverse voices and intergenerational impacts.

Transparency and Adaptability

- Maintaining openness in processes and decisions.
- Revisiting and adapting initiatives as needed based on feedback and outcomes.
- Sharing knowledge and lessons learned in non-extractive ways.

Youth Empowerment

- Ensuring opportunities and resources are directed towards Indigenous youth.
- Reducing harms from colonization and fostering healing transitions for future generations.

Ethical Research and Reporting

- Ensuring rigorous consent and respect in data collection and community engagement.
- Tailoring reporting processes to benefit and empower Indigenous communities.
- Avoiding unnecessary burdens on organizations receiving funding.

Relational Accountability

- Reciprocity in relationships with communities and funders.
- Recognizing and addressing power imbalances.
- Building initiatives that prioritize long-term community ownership and capacity building.

These themes reflect a deep commitment to ethical integrity, respect for sovereignty, and a focus on building equitable and sustainable partnerships.

QUESTION 9: Is there anything else you would like to share that could help in designing an initiative that effectively supports wellbeing in Native communities?

Holistic and Long-Term Approaches

- Emphasize interconnectedness: culture, language, land, and community well-being are foundational and intertwined.
- Leadership development, cultural revitalization, and community initiatives require sustained investment over time.
- Success metrics should be flexible and reflect Indigenous worldviews, not just Western outcomes.

Relational and Community-Centered Engagement

- Build direct, authentic relationships with communities rather than relying heavily on intermediaries.
- Respect and include relationally recognized Indigenous communities, not just state-recognized ones.
- Actively engage Indigenous communities in designing, implementing, and evaluating initiatives.

Strength-Based and Trauma-Informed Practices

- Highlight and support existing strengths and resilience within Indigenous communities.
- Ensure all initiatives are trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and grounded in historical understanding.

Flexibility and Adaptability

- Be prepared to adapt to the evolving needs and circumstances of communities.
- "Failing forward" is an acceptable and necessary part of learning and relationship-building.

Cultural Revitalization and Spirituality

- Culture and spiritual practices are central to Indigenous identities and well-being.

- Support initiatives reinforcing cultural survival, language fluency, and traditional ecological knowledge.

Youth and Future Leadership

- Invest in programs that empower Indigenous youth as future leaders.
- Recognize young people's critical role in addressing climate change, justice, and community challenges.

Policy, Advocacy, and Systems Change

- Leverage philanthropic influence to advocate for policy changes that support Indigenous sovereignty and well-being.
- Promote civic engagement as part of community well-being strategies.

Inclusive and Transformative Processes

- Use participatory approaches that value all voices equally, such as sitting in a circle or engaging in ceremonies.
- Acknowledge and disrupt ingrained assumptions and colonial practices in philanthropy.

Resource Allocation and Accessibility

- Provide multi-year, unrestricted funding that supports community-led priorities.
- Address infrastructural barriers, such as lack of high-speed internet, to improve access and equity.

Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration

- Share learnings, project ideas, and best practices across the sector to amplify impact.
- Engage Indigenous media and other platforms to promote visibility and inclusion.

Actionable Steps:

- **Engage Indigenous Consultants:** Provide a list of Native evaluators or consultants trained in Indigenous methodologies to help meet grant evaluation requirements.
- **Support Cultural Practices:** Include budgets for ceremonies, elder honorariums, and cultural events.

- **Amplify Youth Voices:** Partner with youth-led organizations and support their leadership in initiatives.
- **Prioritize Relationship Building:** Allocate time and resources to building trust and authentic connections with communities.
- **Invest in Land and Long-Term Sustainability:** Support land reclamation and initiatives that generate community wealth over time.

This framework ensures initiatives are meaningful, impactful, and aligned with Indigenous values and needs.

QUESTION 10: Can you recommend any additional resources or contacts that we should reach out to as we think through the development of a new initiative?

Research and Metrics

- Development of new health and wellness metrics.
- Utilizing existing research and white papers (e.g. "Harvesting analogy").
- Exploring western vs. Native approaches (e.g. disaster response, intellectual property rights).

Key Organizations

- Indigenous-led organizations in philanthropy (e.g. NDN Collective, Illuminative, NOA, IFIP, Cultural Survival).
- Foundations with Indigenous-focused funding (e.g. Bush Foundation, Northwest Area Foundation, First Nations Development Institute).
- Legal and financial organizations supporting Indigenous ventures (e.g. Native Hawaiian Corporation, Native American Capital and Investment Association).

Influential Individuals

- Leaders and experts with Indigenous ties (e.g. Vanessa Roanhorse, Valerie Red-Horse Mohl, Chrissy Castro, Dawson Her Many Horses, Deb Haaland).
- Specialists in specific areas like climate change and venture capital.

Books, Articles, and Educational Resources

- *Decolonizing Wealth* (last section noted).
- *Warrior Nation* (on Red Lake leadership and community policies).
- Articles on Indigenous ways of working and addressing conflicts of interest.
- Training and allyship workshops.

Youth and Community Engagement

- Programs for Indigenous youth (e.g. Carla Knapp's work with Boys & Girls Clubs, Naomi Miguel's financial literacy tools).
- Wisdom keepers and elders as part of the process.
- Culturally aligned gatherings and events for knowledge sharing.

Financial and Economic Models

- Indigenous-led CDFIs with strong track records (e.g. Skya Ducheneaux, Lakota Mauer).
- Examples of successful tribal reconciliation models.
- Highlighting zero loan defaults as an example of trust in Indigenous communities.

Philanthropy and Indigenized Approaches

- Tools and reports on Indigenizing philanthropy.
- Successful examples of funding Indigenous artists and communities (e.g. Racing Magpie in South Dakota).
- Collaborative approaches to tribal reconciliation and community-driven solutions.

Capacity Building and Training

- Board training for Native organizations (e.g. American Indian Opportunity).
- Allyship and capacity-building workshops to support internal teams.

This structured compilation emphasizes collaboration, respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, and leveraging both established and innovative approaches to funding and support. These themes underline the importance of bridging traditional and modern strategies in philanthropic initiatives.