



## **Case Study: Best Practices for Partnering with Native Communities**

### **Overview of CIMCC Strength Based Characteristics**

The California Indian Museum and Cultural Center operates all of its programming through a trauma informed and strengths based lens. The core of a strengths based model revolves around the goal of focusing on the fact that each individual has their unique strengths/abilities/knowledge that he/she can rely on in order to overcome problems that they encounter in life. Through a tribal perspective we acknowledge that our community members can draw strength from traditional cultural practices. Through cultural revitalization we can foster resilience in the face of adversity. Lastly, due to the ongoing impact of colonization in our tribal communities we also have to engage in approaching our programming through a trauma informed lens. A trauma-informed approach focuses on the key principles of: safety, trustworthiness, transparency, peer support, collaboration, mutuality, empowerment, voice, choice and cultural/historical/gender issues (SAMHSA, 2015). While addressing these principles we always ensure to highlight the resiliency that our ancestors, tribal communities, and ourselves hold within us.

With these frameworks set in place for our programming we address any project through a holistic perspective. In doing so we address the micro to macro level impacts of wellness. For example, in our food sovereignty journey we learned about the impacts that the lack of traditional foods has on tribal communities. We noted that there are disproportionate health issues in our tribal community that

are tied to the lack of healthy traditional foods. Thus our youth aimed to increase awareness for healthy traditional foods. While learning more about this issue we delved deeper and learned that various barriers exist to accessing healthy traditional foods. Thus, our youth worked on addressing those barriers by working to address the policies and actions that non-Native community members have on accessing traditional food resources. This example is great in that it shows how different systems in our community are interwoven in the health of our tribal communities and how to address one issue we must work from the micro to macro to make change occur.

As we work to create programming for youth and our community, it is of the upmost importance that we address the historical trauma that is prevalent in our tribal communities due to the ongoing impacts of colonization. In doing so we recognize that there is a wide range of mental health needs that our community has and that there are tribal specific ways of healing from historical trauma through engaging in cultural practices. We always ensure to create a safe space where everyone engaging in cultural activities at different levels feels supported holistically. We highlight our programming by enforcing the messaging that cultural values are key to connecting to each other and that together we are learning and advocating for the needs of our tribal communities.

Lastly, as an organization we focus on the strengths and resilience of our tribal youth. Oftentimes our youth are bombarded with the negative messaging regarding the stereotypes of their community and are left feeling unmotivated or put down. We work towards highlighting their strengths as individuals so that we can foster: leadership, positive life skills, and teamwork skills. In doing so we build up our youth one by one and connect them to positive tribal role models in our community. It is the intergenerational connection of our community that supports the positive self-image and self-esteem of our youth. This in turn leads to youth finding their voice and utilizing it in a manner to advocate for their community at the county, state, and country level. Our youth through the programming become agents of change that inspire others to take similar action.

## **Tribal Youth Ambassadors Programming**

Our Tribal Youth Ambassador Program was established in 2010 as a service learning program that is culturally and technologically enriched. It is geared toward Native American youth ages 9-24 from Sonoma, Mendocino and Lake County. Our director founded the program when she noticed that not a lot has changed in our education system and that this system is inherently toxic to our youth in that it lacks accurate positive representations of Native American history. This in turn triggers a historical trauma response in Native youth that contributes to the mental health issues that Native youth across the country face. These mental health issues include: suicide, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Our program aims to increase our Native youth's protective factors by connecting them to cultural practices that allow them to heal from historical trauma. By participating in the program youth thrive by staying connected to their cultural practices.

This service learning program has encompassed addressing various issues in our community that include: representation of Native perspectives in education, language revitalization, Native representation in business, Native land stewardship, and policy. Through each program youth are able to expand their professional skills including hard and soft skills. As youth grow professionally and academically they also grow culturally as they become cultural teachers for younger youth in the community. These cultural learning opportunities allow for direct mentorship from tribal culture bearers in our community. Thus, strengthening the cultural bonds across their traditional homelands.

Ultimately our youth learn invaluable skills that allow them to passionately advocate for the needs of their tribal communities. We have seen our youth thrive in their capacities to respond to racism, microaggressions and negative school experiences. We empower each other to together make positive changes in our communities.

## **Food Sovereignty and Youth Participatory Action Research**

Our Tribal Youth Ambassadors began working on their food sovereignty projects journey with us in 2016-2017. We began this year with conducting a food sovereignty and food security assessment of our tribal communities from Sonoma, Mendocino, and Lake County. Through this assessment it was identified that there were gaps in knowledge regarding traditional foods. As a result of this assessment our Tribal Youth Ambassadors decided they wanted to work towards addressing those gaps in knowledge.

From 2017-2018 our Tribal Youth Ambassadors began their Youth Participatory Action Research project with the guiding question of: “what are your ideas for incorporating traditional foods in our daily lives?” 61 surveys were completed by California Indian community members, these survey responses were utilized to assess the food sovereignty needs of our California Indian tribal communities in our tri-county area. In addition, 6 community members that are knowledgeable about California Indian traditional foods were interviewed and 5 community members that are knowledgeable about traditional foods discussed the importance of traditional foods.

Across all community member responses we found that community members define traditional foods as foods “eaten by our ancestors.” Community members that participated in our project also shared the same understanding that traditional foods are vital to our wellbeing, both our physical health and the health of the community in terms of cultural revitalization. Lastly, sharing knowledge about traditional foods is vital in the community.

We found that transmission of knowledge is an issue, but despite this gap, most community members have relatives that possess knowledge about traditional foods. The next action step the youth identified in addressing the communities need could be connecting community members to education

about traditional foods. Thus from 2018-2019 our Tribal Youth Ambassadors engaged in a year two project of YPAR in order to address food sovereignty in their tribal community.

The TYA year two of YPAR engaged community members in the development of a food sovereignty exhibit. The goal with this exhibit is to educate and raise awareness about the diversity and health benefits of traditional foods in our Pomo and Miwok tribal communities. The exhibit highlights the three regions that make up Pomo and Miwok country. The three regions include the lake, the valley, and the coast. The exhibit provides specific information in each region that highlights differences as it relates to the diversity of the landscape, traditional foods, and issues that communities face in those regions. The themes in each region will incorporate feedback given to us by tribal community members through the “Food Sovereignty Exhibit Development Survey” that we shared with our tribal community. We did note that the new exhibit gave an overview about traditional foods and raised awareness and visibility regarding the health benefits that traditional foods give to our tribal communities.

Community members are excited to continue working on food sovereignty issues in the community with our Tribal Youth Ambassadors. In year one of our food sovereignty journey we found that there were issues in accessing knowledge about the importance of traditional foods. As our youth continued to learn about food sovereignty they realized that in order to maintain health and wellness in the community we need to be re-connected in traditional cultural practices. Examples of traditional practices included stewarding the land, harvesting traditional foods, and processing traditional foods. As our youth met with culture bearers from their tribal communities, they learned that re-connecting to traditional foods is key in maintaining physical, psychological, and spiritual health and wellness.

As our youth have gone through this food sovereignty work they have drawn the connection that the health and wellness of their community is impacted by the health of their environment as well.

The exhibit they worked to develop helps to educate the community about this lineage while connecting them to traditional cultural practices and healthier lifestyles.

### **Best Practices and Lessons Learned**

When working with youth it is of the most importance to approach youth programming through a strengths based approach. Having youth do an assessment of their strengths helps them build their confidence and work on growing other aspects of themselves. We find that as we connect youth with cultural practices and help them build their self-esteem they quickly thrive and become young leaders in their community. Our core foundation of our programming is centered on each of us embodying strength as we are the hopes and dreams of our ancestors.

Working with youth is also inspiring because we see the young leaders in our community grow into their role. As young adolescents they are still forming their identity, and through our programming we empower them to safely explore making change occur in their community and take risks to make change occur. One example of this is when we gather with our youth, this activity is positive in that it contributes to cultural revitalization, health, and wellness in our community. However, we face harassment by non-Native community members when engaging in these practices. Thus we together can safely explore how we would like to address the situation. In a safe environment the youth can learn to harness their voice in the face of racism, microaggressions, and oppression.

As youth continue to learn in our program we also witness their growth as individuals while they develop and master life skills, whether it be public speaker or becoming a basketweaver in the community. Youth grow into their passions and begin to envision their future and their responsibility through the role within their community. Lastly, we also note that youth during this pivotal moment in life are still finding a sense of place. They explore where they fit in society, learn to form healthy relationships, and support others. Through social modeling the adults and culture bearers in our project

teach the youth how to be responsible as a member of our community. Part of that responsibility encompasses the role that self care has in the way we re-charge to gear back up to make meaningful change in our community occur.

Overall, the goal is to focus on the fact that each individual has their unique strengths/abilities/knowledge that he/she can rely on in order to overcome problems that they encounter in life. Once youth feel that support and know that others believe in them they thrive. It is critical to weave activities into your program that will assist youth in developing their self-esteem and increase their capabilities to take on leadership roles.

In implementing youth programming there is many lessons that have been learned. The first one is that parent participation is key, the more that parents are involved in the programming the more the youth become interested and actively involved as leaders in the program. The second lesson has been that helping tribal youth foster their cultural identity is key in addressing their historical trauma. As youth are continuously triggered by our society, such as during their educational paths when their culture is completely misrepresented, as they continue to heal through cultural practices they find their voice and become leaders that advocate against injustices that their community faces. While they learn to address such injustices it is important to know what interests they have and match the programming to meet their needs. In addition, it is important to connect them with Native professionals in the field that can inspire and guide Native youth as they reach their educational and professional goals and dreams.

In addition, as youth become more involved in programming it is important to balance integrating culture and technology. Teaching youth how to navigate the world with many skills allows them to explore different passions in life as they prepare to plan their future. In addition, connecting youth to intergenerational learning is key as this practice connects our generations and increases

cultural connectedness and cultural revitalization. The more a youth is connected to their community the more they feel supported to achieve their goals. This in turn forms a long lasting relationship where youth know that beyond the program they will be supported every step of their journey.

Lastly, it is important for a program to leverage local resources to benefit the youth programming. Not only does this help Native youth in feeling supported by their wider community, but it allows for partnerships and opportunities that allow for systematic and policy change in our community. We have found that through community partnerships our youth learn to advocate for the needs of their community as we establish the partnership together. The more we can educate others, the more we can make meaningful change occur in our community.

### **Best Practices for Partnering with Native Communities**

In order to be a true partner to a project with a Native community one must truly be open to understanding the holistic approaches of addressing an issue in a tribal community. Due to colonization, many issues in Indian Country are interwoven. In order to address one, other issues must also be addressed and worked in order for true success and positive change to occur. For example, encouraging Native families to exercise and eat healthy foods from a Western lens is ineffective in addressing the health disparities tribal communities face. A deep examination into the issue as to why these health disparities are prevalent is vital. While it is not the job of the tribal community to educate the partner on the issue, it becomes important for the partner to ask the community how an issue needs to be addressed and perhaps even ask for guidance in learning about the issue attempting to address.

Every tribal community has their own cultural practices and protocols that are to be followed. It is the partner's responsibility to honor and respect those practices. It is important to not overstep those boundaries because if the partner does overstep they are actively engaging in colonial power dynamics that further oppress the tribal community they are partnering with. Some practices that might be

prevalent in Indian Country are: starting with an opening prayer, smudging, and providing food during cultural events. It is important to note that as a partner you do not have an entitlement to understanding the cultural practices and protocols, they simply must be respected in order to be a true partner and establish a relationship with the community.

Lastly, research conducted with tribal communities must be done completely from a decolonized perspective. The world of research and academia has caused a lot of harm and has contributed to historical trauma in our tribal communities. This occurs because Western ways of conducting research are inherently exploitative and further contribute to the colonization of tribal communities. Tribal communities must always guide the way research is conducted in their community. Having tribal community input in every step of the process is mandatory. It is recommended that a partner is familiar with the following books in order to understand their role in a collaborative research project:

- *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Linda Tuhiwai Smith.  
Zed Books. 2012.
- *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. **Shawn Wilson**. **Fernwood Publishing Co. 2008.**
- *Indigenous Statistics: A Quantitative Research Methodology*. **Maggie Walter and Chris Andersen**. **Left Coast Press. 2013.**

Ultimately, a partner does not have any ownership over the research. The Native agency/community/tribe is the one who decides how the research should be conducted. It is important to note that some of the research data collected during the project might not even be fully accessible to the partner. At the end of the day it is up to the Native agency/community/tribe to decide what is best for their community via the manner in which the research is conducted from the beginning to the end such as when the information is published (if it is decided it should be published). Being a true partner

centers on listening to the guidance of the Native agency/community/tribe and respecting their concerns and direction.