

Core Cultural Values

Is there a set of core beliefs or common values that can serve as a foundation for framing a tribal approach to evaluation?

This question was the center of focus group discussions, meetings, and literature research, all of which contributed to the development of this Framework.

This section describes the common cultural values that emerged from the effort to define an Indigenous framing for evaluation. Although we have identified common values, which influence the ways evaluation should be undertaken in tribal communities, each community should consider this question and determine which values should inform its evaluation practice. To do so, communities could engage in a discussion prompted by these or similar questions:

We often refer to cultural values when designing programs for our communities:

1. What does this mean in our community?
2. What values do we promote when designing our programs?
3. How could or should these values influence our approach to evaluating our programs?

In the Indigenous Evaluation Framework focus groups, these values were identified as central to most tribal cultures:

- *Being People of a Place*
- *Recognizing our Gifts*
- *Centrality of Community and Family*
- *Tribal Sovereignty*



People of a Place



Dibé Nitsaa (Mount Hesperus)



Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor)

Among Indigenous cultures, place is a living presence. Tribal creation stories explain how a people came to be in a place that is central to their sense of a homeland. Despite wrenching histories detailing the loss of much of our homelands and displacement from them, we still have strong connections to the natural world within and around these places—the lands, mountains, oceans, rivers, lakes and other features that make up our homeland. Our sense of place provides roots to our communities and defines our nationhood.

In *God is Red*, Vine Deloria writes about these sacred places:

The vast majority of Indian tribal religions . . . have a sacred center at a particular place, be it a river, a mountain, a plateau, valley, or other natural feature. This center enables the people to look out along the four dimensions and locate their lands, to relate all historical events within the confines of this particular land, and to accept responsibility for it. Regardless of what subsequently happens to the people, the sacred lands remain as permanent fixtures in their cultural and religious understanding.¹²

In addition to a tribal people's responsibility to their sacred places, there is a reciprocal relationship in this profound connection to land. This is expressed by an Apache woman who explains, "The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us."¹³

In describing Native Science, Gregory Cajete explains that the peoples' places are sacred and bounded, and their science is used to understand, explain and honor the life they are tied to in the greater circle of physical life. Sacred sites are mapped in the space of tribal memory to acknowledge forces that keep things in order and moving.

¹² Deloria, Jr., V., *God Is Red*, Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, CO, 1994, p. 67.

¹³ Basso, K. H., *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, NM, 1996, p. 38.

Everything has a time and an evolutionary path. This is the understanding of evolution through natural cycles. The universe has a direction to it, and people have a special vocation in that they initiated, at the proper time, new relationships and events.

A tribe’s Indigenous knowledge is intimately connected to the natural world and is centered on learning about the place of the people within it—nature’s balances and relationships. This sense of place is the opposite of the Western perspective, which seeks to manipulate the world and create what they believe is a better man-made environment. As Aua, an Iglulik, explained to an anthropologist:

One of the differences between the white man’s ways and [our] way is that most of the dominant society’s world is . . . a highly technological world, invented in the form of machines, labor-saving devices, and urban systems of living. In this kind of world you learn to ask why because those inventions do have an origin that can be explained. But the traditional mysteries which include hunger, pain, sickness, and death, cannot be explained. They can only be witnessed and then dealt with through a system of knowledge and practices that let the natural world teach human society its complex, and often mysterious ways. The natural way . . . determines how people live, how people will act. In turn, education or learning determines how we will use the natural world to our benefit and how we can live harmoniously or in balance with it.¹⁴

Our Indigenous knowledge and culture, including our ceremonies, songs, and rituals, help connect our communities to the natural world around us. In the basket making story, when the Cherokee people were removed from the Southeast to a new and different land, Oklahoma, they had to learn new songs to help them deal with their new environment. As Eric Jolly states, “The old songs no longer worked,” so new songs had to be brought forth.



White Mountain Apache Reservation Painting

“The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us.”

Apache woman’s quote

¹⁴ Beck, P. V., Walters, A. L., Francisco, N., *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*, Dine College, Tsaile, AZ, 2001, p. 51.



Cankdeska Cikana Community College

“The community is the place where the forming of the heart and face of the individual as one of the people is most fully expressed. It is the context in which the person comes to know relationship, responsibility, and participation in the life of one's people.”

Centrality of Community and Family

Among Indigenous people, family and community are the core manifestations of how each tribal person sees his or her inter-relatedness to others within the tribe. The sense of family and community is expressed in different ways by different tribes. Most, if not all, tribal cultures recognize or are organized around various tribal kinship groups. Some have clans as a form of kinship group; others, such as the Lakota, recognize extended family groups—the *tiospaye*—as their form of kinship groups.

Gregory Cajete writes that it is within community that one comes to know what it is to be related:

The community is the place where the forming of the heart and face of the individual as one of the people is most fully expressed. It is the context in which the person comes to know relationship, responsibility, and participation in the life of one's people.¹⁵

When we introduce ourselves, some of us acknowledge our ancestors and lineage, connecting the present with those who have lived before. Community is expressed in ceremony, in clan relationships, in family structures. As we proceed in life, we acknowledge that we have many grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. All of these are a part of who we are as a person and as a family. In most, if not all, tribal communities, the distinction that non-Indians make between nuclear and extended family does not apply because to many of us, our cousins are our brothers and sisters and our aunts and uncles carry the same authority as our parents.

Vine Deloria relates the value for family and community to the larger life cycle of the world, the seasons, and other growth processes:

¹⁵ Cajete, G., *Native Science*, Clear Light Publishers, Santa Fe, NM, 2000, p. 96.

Thus all entities are regulated by the seasons, and their interaction has a superior season of its own that encompasses their relationship and has a moral purpose. Tribes broke human patterns down into several steps: prebirth, babies, children, youths, adults, mature adults, and elders. The idea of the “seven generations” was commonly used by the Plains tribes to describe the relationships existing within a genetic family. If a family was respectable and responsible, its members would be granted old age and a person could live long enough to see and know his great-grandparents and his great-grandchildren. Thus, generations, not decades, were the measures of human life.¹⁶

Recognizing our Gifts

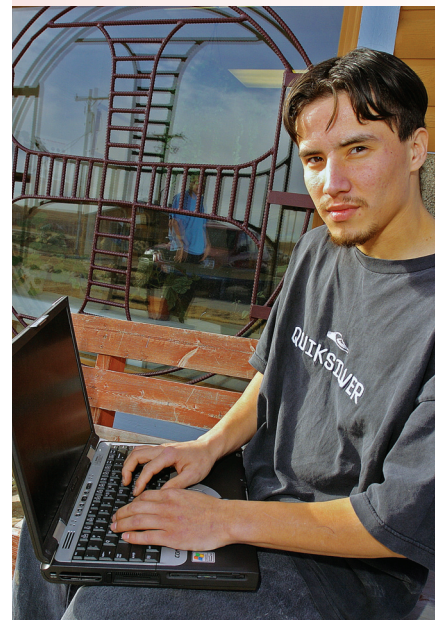
Within the traditional concepts of the living universe and relationship, respect is a moral imperative. Respect for the sanctity of all things requires a willingness to allow “others to fulfill themselves, and the refusal to intrude thoughtlessly on another.”¹⁷ Every entity within this natural world has its purpose and should exercise free will and choice within its own realm. The core value of respect requires that we honor the uniqueness of every person and value his or her gifts. In education, each student’s skills and talents, as well as learning style, should be taken into consideration.

From an Indigenous perspective, because each of us comes into the world with special gifts, each person also must show respect for his or her own gifts. Thus, life becomes a journey of self-discovery. This journey requires self-discipline and the courage to follow one’s unique pathway in life.

Respecting and encouraging the full development of our gifts is one of our common cultural values. Some define this value as

¹⁶ Deloria, Jr., V., *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader*, Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, CO, 1999, p. 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 51.



Blackfeet Community College Student
Photo by Tony Bynum

Respecting and encouraging the full development of our gifts is one of our common cultural values.



Members of 2005 Student Government,
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*"The duty of all people . . . is
to assist others on their
paths. . . ."*

personal sovereignty, which allows us to fulfill our destiny. However, with the freedom for self expression there is a responsibility to respect the relationships we have within a living universe. Responsibility for maintaining harmony of life falls equally on all of us as does a responsibility to use our gifts to contribute to the community.

Rupert Ross, a legal scholar who has observed and written about First Nations in Canada, expressed the sense of personal sovereignty as:

. . . the conviction that life is a process of slow and careful self-fulfillment and self realization. That process of maturation continues until death, and so no one ever becomes all that they can become. The duty of all people, therefore, is to assist others on their paths, and to be patient when their acts or words demonstrate that there are things still to be learned. The corollary duty is to avoid discouraging people by belittling them in any fashion and so reducing their respect for and faith in themselves.¹⁸

A focus group participant framed the nature of this life-long learning process:

The Navajo way . . . we learn from knowledge that is out there, knowledge that we say has been given to the people, knowledge that has been specifically given to the Navajo. . . . It's not something that you learn in a short period of time or a defined period of time. Today, our children go through 12 years of school, and they are supposed to know quite a bit. But for Navajo People, learning about the knowledge given to the people is a lifetime thing. People from six to old age are still learning these things.

Focus Group Participant, Phoenix

¹⁸ Ross, R., *Dancing with a Ghost: Explaining Indian Reality*, Octopus, Markham, Ontario, 1992, p. 27. (Ross cites two Aboriginal Canadians who guided his understanding: Dr. Clare Brant, a Mohawk psychiatrist and Charlie Fisher, an Elder from Islington Reserve.)

Sovereignty

Tribal sovereignty is our expression of nationhood. For each of our tribes, our sovereignty derives from our sense of place, our languages, history, and culture. It is deeper than a legal or political relationship.

Good . . . projects in Indian Country are explicitly part of a nation-building agenda—that is, local people have themselves planned the project and placed it within a larger vision of what they hope their nation will be. Project evaluation can contribute to these nation-building efforts by providing needed feedback to local implementers and activists about what the problems that plague their nations are, how the problems might be solved, and how well the solutions are working.¹⁹

Reclaiming our Indigenous ways of knowing is an assertion of tribal sovereignty. We tribal people assert our right to design our own institutions, such as our schools and educational programs, or to redesign other institutions, such as our tribal governments and court systems, we bring into place values that are fundamental to our ways of knowing. Reclaiming our ways of determining merit and worth is also part of this process.

From an Indian perspective, tribal sovereignty has implications beyond the political because sovereignty resides within the community or the whole of the tribe, not solely with the tribal council or tribal leadership. In the future, the reclaiming of Indigenous knowledge, for some tribes, may involve moving away from governance based on the Indian Reorganization Act and toward restoring traditional forms of government.



National Museum of the American Indian
Opening Ceremonies

Tribal Sovereignty

- *Nationhood*
 - *Ownership*
- *Political Status*
 - *Tribal process*
- *Reclaiming our Indigenous Ways of Knowing*
 - *Inherent right to think, feel, act*
 - *Capacity*
 - *Permission*
 - *Meaningfulness*

¹⁹ Robertson, P., Jorgenson, M. & Garrow, C. "Indigenizing Evaluation Research: How Lakota Methodologies Are Helping 'Raise the Tipi' in the Oglala Sioux Nation," in *The American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3 & 4 (Summer/Fall 2004). University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 2004, p. 519.



Glacier Waterfall, Glacier National Park, MT

Framing evaluation practice to be responsive to strongly held values is a continuously evolving process.

Indigenous evaluation practices that honor sovereignty try to engage the broader community of elders, traditionalists, and other community members while ensuring that tribal councils and tribal leaders are consulted. Indigenous evaluation engages any informal or formal tribal review processes that may be in place—such as review by tribal councils, program advisory committees, or tribal institutional review boards.

Cultural Values and Evaluation Practice

Exploring and naming our values is a first step in developing an Indigenous approach to evaluation. To establish a Framework for evaluation, we explored ways of knowing and central values that resonated throughout our research. We believe that these influence an approach to evaluation in a number of ways. Our epistemologies tell us that context is critical, and we can only come-to-know within a program's setting and situation. Our programs are place-based and must be designed and evaluated in ways that understand our connections to place. We recognize the unique gifts of everyone and cannot be limited to using only narrow measures of merit or achievement to assess learning. Community is central to our sense of ourselves as a people and should be considered in our evaluation practice. Finally, sovereignty dictates that evaluation belongs to the tribe and community and should be practiced in ways that help us learn and move forward. The table on the next page provides an overview of how the beliefs regarding knowledge and cultural values could influence evaluation practice in our communities.

Beliefs-Values

Indigenous Evaluation Practice

Indigenous Knowledge Creation

Context is Critical

- Evaluation itself becomes part of the program and its implementation, it is not an “external” function.
- Evaluation needs to be holistic and attend to relationships between the program and community.
- Evaluators must ensure that variables are to be analyzed without ignoring the entire program context.
- Evaluation knowledge honors multiple ways of knowing.
- Evaluation recognizes our moral responsibility to reflect on what we are learning and use knowledge to improve our programs and community.

People of a Place

Respect Place-based Programs

- Honor the place-based nature of many of our programs by acknowledging its relationship to the community, including its history, current situation, and the individuals affected.
- Respect that what occurs in one place may not be easily transferred to other situations or places.

Centrality of Community and Family

Connect Evaluation to Community

- Engage community when planning and implementing an evaluation.
- Use participatory practices that engage stakeholders.
- Make evaluation processes transparent.
- Understand that programs may not focus only on individual achievement, but also on restoring community health and well being.

Recognizing our Gifts—Personal Sovereignty

Consider the Whole Person when Assessing Merit

- Allow for creativity and self-expression.
- Use multiple ways to measure accomplishment.
- Recognize that people enter programs at different places and with different skills and experience.
- Make connections to accomplishment and responsibility.

Tribal Sovereignty

Create Ownership and Build Capacity

- Ensure tribal ownership and control of data.
- Follow tribal Institutional Review Board processes.
- Build capacity in the community.
- Secure proper permission if future publishing is done.
- Report in ways meaningful to tribal audiences as well as to funders.

Traditional knowledge creation and cultural values provide the context for assessing Western evaluation practices.

Framing evaluation practice responsive to strongly held values is a continuously evolving process. There is not one set of steps or practices that define Indigenous evaluation. What it is, or becomes, will emerge from our collective attempts to ensure that traditional values are at the core of any approach to evaluating programs in our communities. As part of our discussion, we can explore ways in which evaluation can be responsive to the values we have defined as common. However, how Indigenous evaluation is realized in practice will depend on each program's situation and context within its own setting, community, and tribe.

Reframing Evaluation

Traditional knowledge creation and cultural values form the Framework for Indigenous evaluation. They provide the grounding for assessing Western evaluation practices for their relevance and applicability in our communities. It is from this Framework that Western evaluation practices such as logic modeling, design, or data collection should be considered and reframed. We are not suggesting that Western evaluation methods should no longer be used when working within an Indigenous framing. However, we believe that some methods can be questioned, adapted, and possibly even rejected when necessary. **The AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework is not a new paradigm; rather it is a shifting of emphasis towards centering evaluation practice so as to respond to tribal values and community needs. The Framework guides our choices of methods and informs the processes we use to respect our cultures and engage our communities.**



In the past, the requirements or needs of funders have been the primary drivers for evaluation in Indian Country. Their expectations

of evaluation have usually been based on Western practice. However, if Native people are to take ownership of evaluation and fully benefit from it, we need to examine what evaluation really means in our contexts. We need to look at traditional beliefs and values and let these influence our way of practicing evaluation.

The goal is to make our values the central drivers for evaluation practice, rather than assuming we have to accept only Western values. This does not mean that Western evaluation should be abandoned. Many aspects of evaluation practice within the Western tradition are highly compatible with Indigenous values and ways of knowing.²⁰

To our funders, we need to articulate the reasons behind our evaluation choices, with the goal of eventually influencing their expectations. We may never fully change their expectations, and we will need to accommodate their mandates in our evaluations. However, as our understanding, practice, and articulation of Indigenous evaluation grows, external influence from funders should also become more responsive to our sense of the correct way to evaluate our programs. We want to draw them into the circle.

The following sections outline the basic steps involved in conducting evaluation within the Framework of Western practice. However, in presenting the steps involved in doing evaluation, the Indigenous ways of knowing and values discussed thus far are used to guide a reframing process. The reframing is an attempt to look at Western practices through an Indigenous Evaluation Framework and consider how these practices could or should be adapted to be responsive to the tenets of Indigenous knowledge creation and the common values of place, personal gifts, family and community, and sovereignty.

²⁰ AIHEC recommends that all evaluators working in Indian Country also consult the American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principles for Evaluation. (See Resources.)

FRAMEWORK

Core Cultural Values

