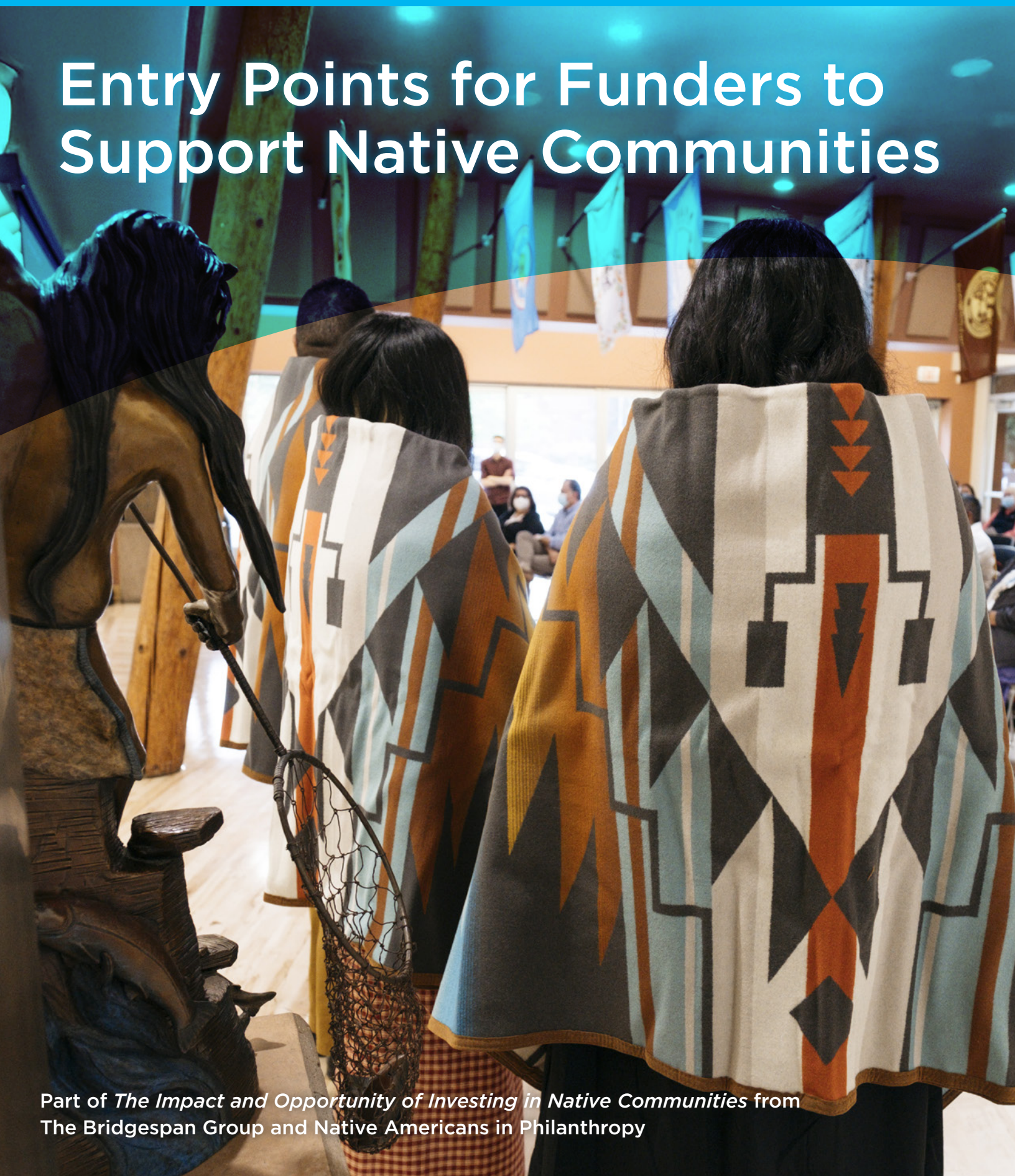
PART TWO **BRIGHT SPOTS**

# Entry Points for Funders to Support Native Communities



Part of *The Impact and Opportunity of Investing in Native Communities* from The Bridgespan Group and Native Americans in Philanthropy

> **“We have strong, vibrant Native Nations and Native not-for-profit sector—they’re just horribly underfunded.”**
>
> MIKE ROBERTS (TLINGIT TRIBE), PRESIDENT AND CEO, FIRST NATIONS DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Beginning in 2022, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation initiated an internal process to explore how it could better support Native and Indigenous people. MacArthur already had some engagement with Native communities; in 2020 for instance, it dedicated more than $27.7 million of its equitable recovery grantmaking initiative to Indigenous Peoples. These grants came with relatively few restrictions, and organizations spent those funds in very different ways. However, in the years since, Claire Poelking (non-Native), a program officer at MacArthur, saw that the philanthropic sector’s focus on Native communities began to wane.

“We noticed that without being more intentional about focusing on Native and Indigenous communities, they weren’t often included in other kinds of groups,” says Poelking. “BIPOC means Black, Indigenous, and people of color. The ‘I’ faded out a little bit, and we saw that within our own grantmaking.”

Historically, MacArthur’s engagement with Native communities was through its self-defined priority areas, like climate change, criminal justice reform, and media. Poelking described a subtle but important shift to looking beyond the rigid confines of traditional philanthropic siloes to explore better ways to support Native communities. Over the past few years, her team has had hundreds of conversations with Native leaders to figure out where best to plug in.

Through landscape analysis, intentional convening, consultation, and deep listening, MacArthur was able to better align its portfolio with the range of priorities of the Native communities it serves. MacArthur also received valuable lessons on the “how” of grantmaking—ways of working that informed not just its engagement with Native communities but its grantmaking approach more generally.

“We heard about the desire to have funders provide a clear and quantified commitment that demonstrates trust, agency, and autonomy to Indigenous leaders,” says Poelking. “We also heard about the need for funders to make changes in our leadership and philanthropy, which means internal education for staff and board so that they have a baseline understanding of the history of Indigenous Peoples. And we understood the desire to see designated, substantive, community-connected Indigenous board and staff representation.”

Previous page: Graduates of the Wy’east Medicine Pathway and OHSU School of Medicine honored during a Northwest Native American Center of Excellence Blanketing Ceremony. (Photo: Northwest Native American Center of Excellence)

# Entry Points

One thing that stood out from our months of interviews and discussions is that there are entry points for investment in Native communities for any funder. Often these investments can fit current portfolios and priorities, no matter a funder's issue or geographical focus. Our research surfaced a multitude of ready opportunities for non-Native philanthropy to begin engaging immediately. We've organized these into five key entry points.

**ENTRY POINT: PEOPLE**

## Serve more people, and more effectively, within existing target populations.

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care in the United States. Its mission is to provide and improve, and ultimately prevent the need for, foster care. Its laser focus on child welfare led them to deep engagement with Native communities.

"The Indian Child Welfare Act represents the gold standard for child safety and well-being—not just for Native communities but for every community in this country," says Dr. Zeinab Chahine (non-Native), executive vice president of child and family services at Casey Family Programs, referring to the law that establishes standards for the removal of Native children from their families and requirements that they be placed in homes that reflect Native values and culture. "It is an excellent example of how supporting Tribal Nations in overcoming challenges can point the way for progress for the entire country."

Casey Family Programs' Indian Child and Family Well-being Program now has agreements with 19 Tribal Nations that honor Tribal sovereignty, support nation-building efforts, and help build partnerships with the broader child welfare profession. It's a partnership that dates back more than four decades.

"We have come to understand that true partnership begins with respecting Tribal sovereignty," says Chahine. "Tribes are best positioned to know what their children and families need and to provide support in a way that builds on the inherent strength and resilience of their own cultures. You must be willing to listen openly, with humility, and learn from the Tribes about what they need in their own communities."

### RESPECTING TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY

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EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT,
CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES,
CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS

Members of Crow Creek Housing Authority, Crow Creek Reservation, SD. (Photo: Uzoma Obasi/Northwest Area Foundation)

**ENTRY POINT: PROGRAM**

## Advance existing issue area objectives, including in response to critical emerging needs.

Founded in 1934, the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAF) works to reimagine and restructure unjust systems throughout Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and the 76 Native Nations that share the same geography.

In the late 1990s, the foundation focused its programmatic strategy on poverty alleviation. "We serve these eight different states. But where is poverty the deepest?" asks Kevin Walker (non-Native), president and CEO of NWAF, describing the foundation's thinking at the time. "That led us to a lot of Tribal communities, reservations, and urban Native communities. So, [NWAF] embarked upon some deep relationships there."

Its grantee the South Dakota Native Homeownership Coalition works across the state in Tribal communities to lower the barriers to homeownership through down payment assistance and innovative lending programs. It has helped secure nearly $25 million in home loans and has become a model for Native housing coalitions in other states.

**ENTRY POINT: PLACE**

## Support communities within existing target geographies.

For funders that take a place-based approach to grantmaking, it's highly likely that no matter where they are based in the United States, there are Native communities and organizations within their target areas.

The Roundhouse Foundation, a private family foundation started by Kathy Deggendorfer, daughter of Gert Boyle, the matriarch of Oregon-based Columbia Sportswear, focuses on the challenges unique to the communities and landscapes of the rural Pacific Northwest.

"When we say rural, that also means reservation communities," says Boyle's granddaughter, Erin Borla (non-Native), the foundation's executive director. "We asked: How do we work across rural and remote Oregon and with the Tribes? How can we be intentional and not screw this up?"

Roundhouse funds across a range of issue areas—arts and culture, education, environmental stewardship, social services—with the guidance of advisory committees, including an Indigenous Advisory Committee. Borla consults the committee, seeking guidance before starting to fund Native projects. "Our Indigenous advisors told us: 'You will screw it up—but start anyway,'" says Borla.

The Indigenous Advisory Committee—diverse in age, Tribal affiliation, and issue focus—receives a stipend to meet at least twice a year to offer guidance and insight on programs and projects on the ground impacting Native communities throughout the Northwest. "Currently, around 24 percent of our portfolio goes to Indigenous-led or Indigenous-serving causes," says Borla. Still, she admits: "We can always do better."

## AIM HIGHER

"Currently, around 24 percent of our portfolio goes to Indigenous-led or Indigenous-serving causes. … We can always do better."

ERIN BORLA (NON-NATIVE), EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE ROUNDHOUSE FOUNDATION

**ENTRY POINT: VALUES**

## Act on organizational values that grapple with the origins of wealth.

Typically, non-Native philanthropy remains muted about the origins of its wealth—fortunes that often were directly or indirectly made at the expense of Native communities.[1] But there are some funders that are clear-eyed and reflective about that history.

"The story of the foundation is intertwined with the story of the dispossession of Native people," explains Walker about the resources available to the NWAF. "There's always been this deep connection with Native communities."

The foundation's origin is inextricably tied to Native Peoples throughout the region. Its wealth derives from the fortune of railroad tycoon James J. Hill, whose Great Northern line connected St. Paul, Minnesota, with Seattle, Washington, in 1889, hastening white settlement throughout the Northwest and devastating Native communities. Decades of discriminatory policies reinforced the accumulation of non-Native wealth in the region. The legacy endures: today, the poorest counties in the Northwest overlap with reservations, and Native people living in the urban centers of the region endure the highest rates of poverty.

NWAF—where 40 percent of the annual grant payout goes to Native communities—is widely seen by Native leaders as one of the more committed, thoughtful, and responsible non-Native funders working with Native communities and Tribal Nations. "I think the most important thing that they are doing in the field is really talking about the origins of their wealth," says Dr. Dana Arviso (Diné)[2], director of Indigenous programs at the Decolonizing Wealth Project. "They wouldn't necessarily use the word 'reparations,' but I think they would say that they're conscious of the need to repair."

Other regional funders have grappled with how the source of their wealth came from the extraction of Native land, like the Bush Foundation, whose wealth derives from the multinational conglomerate 3M, which began as a mining company. The foundation invests in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and the 23 Native Nations that share that geography. Since at least the 1990s, the Bush Foundation has invested in Tribal colleges and Native institutions in the region. In 2008, it elevated its commitment

to Native communities by supporting stronger Tribal governance, which culminated in the creation of the Native Governance Center. In 2021, it committed an additional $50 million to address the Native American wealth gap in the region, in partnership with NDN Collective.[3] That funding was no-strings-attached, to be directed by NDN, including to redefine wealth on Indigenous terms by funding cultural and ceremonial work.

**ENTRY POINT: INNOVATION**

## Learn about and elevate innovative practices based on Indigenous knowledge.

Far too often, non-Native philanthropy's notion of "innovation" compels it to seek out the next "shiny new thing." That approach tends to overlook Native-led problem solving that has sustained the test of time. These Indigenous approaches are rooted in cultures defined by resourcefulness across every conceivable facet of society, from food systems and environmental sustainability to structures of justice and government. The Nature Conservancy, for example, states that partnering with Indigenous communities is "one of the most impactful and enduring actions we can take to protect ecosystems and biodiversity and tackle climate change."[4]

Some funders are recognizing the impact potential that comes from embracing Indigenous innovation. Though estimates vary, evidence suggests that the majority of the world's biodiversity exists on Indigenous land. Some climate funders and practitioners in recent years have become clearer in their support of sovereign Native communities and their stewardship of biodiversity on their traditional lands.

"Meaningful progress in climate action and conservation is inextricably linked to partnership with Native communities," explains Carla Fredericks (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation), CEO of The Christensen Fund. "These lands have been stewarded by Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial, a reality that has gained broader recognition over recent decades.

The fund's contemporary mission has centered on developing authentic, respectful collaborations with Indigenous communities, honoring their rights, traditional ecological knowledge, and leadership."

Examples of Native-led innovation abound in other fields as well, including education. Family

**LISTEN: John Fetzer (White Earth Ojibwe Nation) of Northwest Area Foundation on building authentic relationships**

## EMBRACE INDIGENOUS INNOVATION

"Meaningful progress in climate action and conservation is inextricably linked to partnership with Native communities."

CARLA FREDERICKS (MANDAN, HIDATSA, ARIKARA NATION), CEO, THE CHRISTENSEN FUND

physician Dr. Erik Brodt (Ojibwe) founded the Northwest Native American Center of Excellence to improve the US health system by increasing the number of Native people in the health care workforce. Looking at the data, Brodt noticed that half of Native pre-med students who had been rejected from medical schools never applied again, compared to the two to three application attempts made by non-Natives. "It represented this terminal fracture in the most underrepresented group in all of medicine," he says. "The world is missing out on Native wisdom and excellence."

In response, he created the Wy'east Medicine Pathway, a holistic, culturally specific, tuition-free, 10-month postbaccalaureate health education program for Native students passionate about becoming physicians. By increasing these students' sense of belonging in the education system and embracing traditional healing practices alongside a foundation of medical training, Wy'east is breaking new ground. "By having Native leadership and a Native team, it has allowed us to center Indigenous values more in the context of academia," says Brodt. "What's innovative is we see the challenges facing our communities from a position of strength, possibility, and potential as opposed to disparity."

As a result, after completing the pathway program, approximately 80 percent of the scholars matriculate to medical school and further go on to match at top-tier residency programs, says Brodt.

## What Effective, Authentic Engagement and Support of Native Peoples and Nations Can Look Like

Back in May 2024, RJ Martinez of the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Foundation was helping with a small event at the Kha'p'o Community School in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico. The third graders were excited to perform for the community. Martinez, a singer and dancer, had worked with young people in the community for many years, passing along Native traditions taught to him when he was a boy. Around the same time, a funder came to Martinez with an interest in investing in the community. Because the funder did not have any relationship with the community, Martinez suggested the place to start was coming to the dance. "If I have any advice for funders, it's show up—that's how relationship is built," says Martinez.

Over the course of our research, Native leaders shared helpful advice like this for funders who want to engage with Native communities. Here are the top five tips along with how each connects to one or more of the Five Rs of Indigenous Philanthropy.

### DO YOUR INTERNAL WORK

Educate your organization about Native history, context, and culture to better inform your giving and to become competent in your engagement with Native communities. "It's important for philanthropy to understand how US history overlays with the histories of Native communities," says John Fetzer (White Earth Ojibwe Nation) of NWAF. "The genocide committed against Native people—the legacies of that are still very present."

Along with grappling with history, this internal work requires navigating personal and institutional relationships to the dispossession of Native Peoples. Poelking of the MacArthur Foundation engaged in extensive listening and consultation with Native leaders—including Native Voices Rising's Funder Learning Fellowship—as she helped deepen the foundation's commitment to Native communities. For Poelking, this process also spurred a personal reckoning.

"I am a white woman who has no Indigenous heritage and was leading [MacArthur's] conversations on this topic," she says. "I acknowledged that it is fully inappropriate for me to decide how we should best support Indigenous and Native Peoples. I've always thought of my role largely as gathering information and then trying to weave it together, and have it be very consultative and participatory."

*See **respect** in "The Five Rs: Values of Indigenous Philanthropy."*

## SHOW UP AND LISTEN

Be present and proximate to Native communities. Don't just drop in and leave—take the time to develop and sustain lasting relationships in the community. "Funders who are long-term leaders really go to the communities to see and experience," says Chrystel Cornelius (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians), president and CEO of Oweesta Corporation, a national Native community development financial institution intermediary. "You end up knowing about the families, about the children. There's literal presence in what that looks like, and that is really important within Native cultures."

Engage with humility and inquiry, not preconceived answers. "In the spirit of true listening, ask a community what it needs, because what North Dakota needs will be much different than what the Pueblos are looking at in Arizona, and different from the societies in the Pacific Northwest," she adds.

Where appropriate, engage with Tribal leaders directly, not only with nonprofit leaders. "I want to underscore the importance of meeting with Tribal leaders and hearing before judging," says Alvin Warren (Santa Clara Pueblo), vice president of policy and impact at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Foundation. "What is the reality that Tribal leaders face and the programs and services that Tribal governments are trying to offer in places that sometimes are served by nonprofits and sometimes are not?"

*See **respect** and **relationships** in "The Five Rs: Values of Indigenous Philanthropy."*

## HIRE NATIVE STAFF AND LEADERSHIP

Expand your networks to successfully recruit and better support Native staff, senior leaders, and board members. Native staff and leadership bring visibility, relationships, lived experience, and expertise in the complexities of the Tribal context. They are essential in a funder's journey toward commitment to Native communities.

The LANL Foundation, for example, has Native perspectives and expertise woven through every level of the organization. "We have a Tribal-specific advisory committee, and advisory committees for grantmaking that include Native representation," says Warren. "That complements the fact that we have Native people on our board and

in leadership positions, and Native staff. Creating multiple points to bring Native people into the decision-making processes in foundations I think is crucial."

*See **respect** and **reciprocity** in "The Five Rs: Values of Indigenous Philanthropy."*

## LOOSEN THE GRIP

Provide flexible, long-term capital and define success collaboratively. Work with Native partners to conceive and define metrics that resonate with their communities. "The best philanthropic organizations that work with Tribal communities ask them how they measure success, and they come up with a plan together," says Martinez of the LANL Foundation.

Explore opportunities beyond traditional grantmaking, such as funding policy advocacy work that can amplify the impact of support. "The chance for communities to build their own power, their own voice, their own self-determination and decision making is really exciting," says Nichole June Maher (Tlingit, Haida), president and CEO of Inatai Foundation. "You can do a lot of those things with a 501(c)(3), but you can go even farther with a (c)(4) by electing folks who are accountable to deliver on the vision of a community."

**LISTEN: Megan Minoka Hill (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin) of the Harvard Kennedy School on funders loosening the grip**

(For more on this, see Bridgespan's publication *Using All the Tools in the Toolkit: Funding Advocacy for Social Change*.[5])

*See **redistribution** in "The Five Rs: Values of Indigenous Philanthropy."*

## JUST DO IT

Prioritize funding Native communities—set the intention, get educated, cultivate authentic relationships, and then get going even without a fully developed strategy. Many Native leaders shared a sense of frustration and disillusionment from past experiences with funders who had engaged in dialogue but not followed up with substantive action. That dynamic has led to fatigue and a lack of trust in some cases. Our research surfaced a range of potential investment points of entry for non-Native philanthropy that are well within conventional frameworks—places where funders could lean in immediately to amplify impact or respond to chronically unmet needs. (See "Just Do It: Pathways to Get Started Right Now".)

"I think philanthropy needs to stop pontificating about what this looks like," says Cornelius of Oweesta Corporation. "You've been having these conversations for 10 years—just do it. If it has to be little steps that are comfortable to you, great. Bigger, even better."

*See **responsibility** in "The Five Rs: Values of Indigenous Philanthropy."*

Members of American Indian Community Housing Organization's teen and pre-teen Indigenous food sovereignty project, Giinawiind Giginitaawigi'gomin ("Together We Grow"), Duluth, MN. (Photo: Uzoma Obasi)

*While the Native leaders we spoke with appreciated funders willing to grab hold of the opportunity and impact that ready entry points provide, many also pointed to a higher level of opportunities available to any funder regardless of geography or issue area focus.* ***Part Three*** *presents potential engagements with Native communities for funders with an appetite for greater complexity and longer time horizons.*

**LISTEN: Chrystel Cornelius (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians) of the Oweesta Corporation on just do it**

## Endnotes

1 See, for example, "100-Year Vision: A Just Transition for Philanthropy," Justice Funders, accessed April 4, 2025 and Sarah Sunshine Manning, "Decolonizing Wealth," NDN Collective, November 20, 2018.
2 Throughout this report, we share the Tribal identities of interviewees.
3 Jenna Kunze, "Bush Foundation commits $50 million to address Native American wealth gap," *Tribal Business News*, March 31, 2021.
4 "How We Work: Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities," The Nature Conservancy, accessed April 4, 2025.
5 Debby Bielak, Liz Jain, Mahdi Fariss, Indu Pereira, and Zach Slobig, *Using All the Tools in the Toolkit: Funding Advocacy for Social Change*, The Bridgespan Group, April 2024.

# Acknowledgments

This research was conducted in partnership between The Bridgespan Group and Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP). The research team included from NAP Erik Stegman, Winoka Yepa, and Brian Barlow, and from Bridgespan Rohit Menezes, Peter Birke, Lyell Sakaue, Zach Slobig, Cora Daniels, and alums Evan Saura Ramsey and César Arévalo.

Native Americans in Philanthropy also convened an Advisory Committee of Tribal leaders, elders, youth, and Native philanthropic professionals whose insights were critical in shaping key themes, ideas, and research findings in the report. We would like to thank each Advisory Committee member for sharing their time, knowledge, and stories.

AlexAnna Salmon
Alicia Mousseau
Alvin Warren
Anpao Duta Flying Earth
Candice Joe
Carly Bad Heart Bull
Dr. Dana Arviso
Eddie Sherman
Emily Edenshaw
Heather Fleming
Janeen Comenote
Kelsey Scott
Leroy Buster Silva
Lori Pourier
McKaylin Peters
Monica Nuvamsa
Nichole June Maher
RJ Martinez
Shelley Dreadfulwater
Sue Morris
Taralyn Ipina
Whitney Sawney

We would also like to thank the many inspiring nonprofit and philanthropic leaders who shared their time and insights, as well as readers who offered feedback on early drafts of the report. In addition, while NAP has been speaking on these issues for years, Bridgespan recognizes that this research stands on the shoulders of the work of organizations who have long been advocating for philanthropy to engage Native communities. There is no way to list all of the organizations to which we're deeply indebted. They include AISES, American Indian College Fund, First Nations Development Institute, First Peoples Fund, the National Congress of American Indians, Native American Rights Fund, Native Forward, Native Ways Federation, NDN Collective, and many others. Thank you.

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