NATIVE AMERICANS IN PHILANTHROPY

The Bridgespan Group

The Impact and Opportunity of Investing in Native Communities

A report in three parts by The Bridgespan Group in partnership with Native Americans in Philanthropy

Collaborating to accelerate social impact

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Cover photo: The Yakama Nation's Iksiks Washana'lama (or Little Swans Dancers) photographed at a community party celebrating the opening of the Inatai Foundation's Pasco office. (Photo: Ignacio Marquez)

A Letter from Native Americans in Philanthropy

Winoka Yepa (Diné)
Director of Research and Education
Native Americans in Philanthropy

Yá'át'ééh (Hello),

For more than 30 years, Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) has worked to increase philanthropic investment in Native communities—today, our work continues to evolve as we not only seek to bring more philanthropic dollars into Native communities, but also to guide the broader philanthropic sector in building relationships grounded in mutual respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. We do this by honoring the Five Rs of Indigenous Philanthropy: Respect, Relationships, Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Redistribution. These values are not just principles; they are practices that define how we show up and how we listen to our Tribal communities.

When we partnered with The Bridgespan Group on this research, we began by sharing our intentions: that the methods and approaches we use to carry out this research center Indigenous values and ways of being. From the outset, we expressed our hope that this process would reflect the principles our communities live by. To move forward in a good way, we invited Native leaders from across the NAP network to guide the process through listening sessions, advisory conversations, and one-on-one interviews. These were not extractive engagements; they were rooted in relational accountability, with stories shared with care and purpose.

Our responsibility was to create a space where Native voices felt safe, seen, and respected. A space where the stories shared could become seeds for collective learning and deeper investment. This kind of trust takes time. It cannot be rushed. But from that trust, powerful truths emerged—truths we are honored to share in this report.

As you read, we invite you to listen with your heart. The wisdom offered by these Native leaders is a form of medicine—guidance for how your organization might rethink power, reimagine partnership, and take bold, tangible steps toward equity and repair.

We are grateful to The Bridgespan Group for their openness and care throughout this process. What we built together reflects a journey toward shared understanding, and we hope this report is a catalyst for more conversations, deeper learning, and lasting change.

Now is the time to not only fund Native communities—but to trust, follow, and stand alongside them.

With gratitude,

Winoka Yepa

Introduction

Back in April 2020, about a month into the COVID-19 pandemic, it was already clear that Native communities across the United States were among the hardest hit, with Native Americans getting sicker and dying at disproportionate rates. For instance, in New Mexico, the percentage of positive cases among Native Americans was more than three times the Native population percentage in the state. Faced with that challenge of tremendous loss and hardship, Alvin Warren (Santa Clara Pueblo[1]), vice president of policy and impact at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Foundation, also saw an opportunity.

"It provided a compelling argument to create the Native American Recovery Fund, and we raised $2 million fairly quickly from donors and funders of all kinds," says Warren about the fund, a partnership between the New Mexico Foundation and local and regional funders to support Native-led organizations to lead long-term community recovery efforts. In the first year of grantmaking, a dozen organizations received unrestricted, general operating support grants for a range of solutions, including caretaking of ancestral lands, food sovereignty programs, youth leadership development, and support for women entrepreneurs.

For Warren, it was a rare moment when funders came together and recognized that to achieve the impact they sought, they couldn't overlook Native communities. "You can't live up to your programmatic goals if you don't invest here," he says.

The Bridgespan Group—a non-Native-led organization that advises social change leaders, including philanthropists, nonprofit and nongovernmental organization leaders, and impact investors—partnered with Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) to produce this report. NAP convened a group of Native leaders from across the country, including Alaska, to participate in three listening sessions. Bridgespan conducted individual interviews with 24 additional Native leaders and non-Native funders and participated in listening sessions with more than 40 leaders from Native communities across the United States. The perspectives shared in this report highlight that opportunities for impact are abundant when philanthropy invests in Native communities, Native-led organizations, or Tribal Nations.[2]

Native communities have long engineered and implemented innovative solutions to universal problems. No matter your grantmaking issue focuses—from education to climate to strengthening democracy—Native institutions and Native leaders are doing critical work, fueled by a long tradition of successful ingenuity, adaptation, and resilience. Likewise, for funders that take a place-based approach to grantmaking, chances are some Native communities and organizations share your geography and can benefit from your investment.

On Sept. 8, 2017, leading a protest at the site of the West Berkeley Shellmound are [left to right] Pua Case (Native Hawaiian), Corrina Gould (tribal chair of Confederated Villages of Lisjan/Ohlone), Norman "Wounded Knee" DeOcampo (Tuolumne Miwok, deceased in 2024), and Chief Caleen Sisk (Winnemem Wintu). They are followed by Run4Salmon organizers Hawane Rios (Native Hawaiian, in brimmed hat), Niria Alicia Garcia (Xicana), and Desirae Harp (Onacáṭis (Miswewal Wappo) tribal nation). (Photo: ©Tom Levy/www.tomlevy.net.)

Embrace the Opportunity

To engage authentically with Native communities is to acknowledge that the history of what is now known as the United States is that of a settler nation that engaged the original inhabitants of the land through policies of domination and dispossession—from removal to allotment, from boarding schools to termination. Colonization, systematic land theft, and active erasure of Native culture have had a collective goal: to render Native communities all but invisible.

"It's important for philanthropy to understand a basic premise—that the majority of America's foundational wealth has come from extraction from Native Peoples and their resources," says Taralyn Ipiña (Yurok Tribe), COO of the Yurok Tribe.

As a product of this context, non-Native philanthropy has a long history of misunderstanding and disengagement from Native communities. Currently, less than one percent of philanthropic dollars explicitly benefits Native Americans.[3] Native-focused philanthropic portfolios remain exceedingly rare among philanthropic institutions, and only 20 percent of large foundations give to Native communities and causes at all.[4] Even funders who have increased their overall support for communities of color in recent years have often continued to overlook Native communities.[5] Such erasure is not limited to funding. Look to the boardrooms and corner offices of institutional philanthropy and you'll find glaring underrepresentation. Native Americans make up only 0.8 percent of foundation board members.[6] Among the top 200 institutional funders, only a single CEO identifies as Native.[7]

"We are in places where nobody really has a vested interest. We are the most invisible of all minorities in the US for many systemic reasons. We're outside of everybody's footprint," 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.

Given the current backdrop of choked federal funding to Tribal Nations and Native communities, the need for philanthropic engagement is only heightened. Some Native organizations, like NDN Collective, have already launched responsive funds in anticipation of a federal funding gap.

Given this history of trauma and its legacies, and the ongoing erasure to present day, the moral case for philanthropy to invest in Native communities is compelling. This article will not repeat that moral case, which has been laid out well in NDN Collective's article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, NAP's work with Candid, and Edgar Villanueva's sweeping treatise, *Decolonizing Wealth*, among others. Instead, given Bridgespan's work advising philanthropic clients, the focus of our research is on the great opportunity for impact that is missed when non-Native funders overlook Native communities. It is a theme that we heard repeatedly in our discussions. When funders neglect Native communities, they squander an opportunity to become more effective grantmakers and shortchange their potential for impact against their own stated philanthropic goals.

We see the audience for this publication as funders interested in engaging Native communities and Tribal Nations but who remain unsure of how to make the case, how to approach the work, or where to get started. This report aspires to support their journeys and provide examples from the experience of other funders already engaging in this work. We present our research in three parts:

- **Part One Assets and Attributes:** A primer for funders new to engagement with Native communities
- **Part Two Bright Spots:** An analysis of current bright spots—ready entry points for funder engagement
- **Part Three Next-Level Opportunities:** An exploration of a set of bolder opportunities ripe for funders ready to deepen their commitment to Native communities and Tribal Nations

As you will read in this report, Native communities accomplish extraordinary things—in every state, across urban and rural landscapes, in a wide range of issue areas—all despite innumerable constraints and obstacles, including limited financial resources. It means the potential for impact is so much more.

"Look at what these communities are doing with pennies," says Tayshu Bommelyn (Tolowa Dee-ni', Karuk, Wintu), senior program officer with Native Cultures Fund. "Can you imagine what they could do if they had dollars?"

We invite you to embrace the opportunity.

Endnotes

1 Throughout this report, we share the Tribal identities of interviewees.
2 Native Nations are independent nations within a nation. The term "Nation" shows respect for sovereignty and the fact that Native Nations each have their own systems of government. Source: Twyla Baker, Wizipan Little Elk, Bryan Pollard, and Margaret Yellow Bird, "How to Talk About Native Nations: A Guide," Native Governance Center, May 27, 2021. In this report, we also refer directly to Tribal governments.
3 *On the Matter of Foundation Giving: Examining the Inequity of Private Philanthropy's Investment in Native Communities*, First Nations Development Institute, 2024.
4 *Investing in Native Communities: Philanthropic Funding for Native American Communities and Causes*, Candid and Native Americans in Philanthropy, 2019.
5 Ellie Buteau, Hannah Martin, and Katarina Malmgren, *Overlooked (Part Two): Foundation Support for Native American Leaders and Communities*, The Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2021.
6 *Native Americans and Board Representation on America's Largest Foundations*, First Nations Development Institute, 2024.
7 Nichole June Maher (president and CEO, Inatai Foundation; the only CEO among the top 200 funders who identifies as Native), in discussion with the authors, July 19, 2024.

PART ONE ASSETS AND ATTRIBUTES

Understanding the Strengths of Native Communities

> **"You can look at Native communities as dire, whether from extraction or isolation, but flip that script and we're emerging economies. We have viable workforces. When we look at climate, more and more people are coming to where we're living. We need to build up the infrastructure, not only for us—we are the future of America."**
>
> CHRYSTEL CORNELIUS (ONEIDA NATION OF WISCONSIN, TURTLE MOUNTAIN BAND OF CHIPPEWA INDIANS), PRESIDENT AND CEO, OWEESTA CORPORATION

Among the constant hurdles that Native-led nonprofits and Tribal Nations face are the general lack of knowledge about Native communities and the widespread stereotypes that persist. "The myths and misperceptions held by philanthropy [are] almost one-to-one correlated with the general public, and the general public's perceptions are really awful," says Michael Roberts (Tlingit Tribe)[1], president and CEO of First Nations Development Institute, which collaborated on studies of foundation program officers' attitudes toward Native issues.

The truth is, when it comes to Native communities, there is an abundance of strengths and opportunities.

There are Native communities and Tribal Nations[2] all across the United States. Today, nearly 7.4 million people living in the United States identify as Native,[3] a subset of which are formally enrolled in "an identifiable group of American Indians by the Department of the Interior, Court of Claims, the Indian Claims Commission, or a State."[4] Native people live and thrive in Tribal communities, rural communities, and urban areas, each with their own particular contexts and stories of identity, migration, and resource distribution.

The federal government recognizes 574 Tribal Nations,[5] but there are approximately 400 additional Tribes that it fails to recognize.[6] Native people and their communities have kept alive 167 Native languages and control approximately 56 million acres.[7,8] The Navajo Nation alone is bigger than Maryland and Massachusetts combined.

"These are living, contemporary cultures with a future, not just with a traumatic past," says Kevin Walker (non-Native), president and CEO of the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAF), a funder with a growing portfolio of grants to Native communities and Native-led organizations. For Walker, as well as for many non-Native people, that means: "You have to relearn what country we're in. You've got to get through the pervasive ignorance and avoidance. You have to want to go there."

LISTEN: Tayshu Bommelyn (Tolowa Dee-ni', Karuk, Wintu) of Native Cultures Fund on abundance and assets

Previous page: Tawney Brunsch (Oglala Sioux), executive director of Lakota Funds and South Dakota Homeownership Coalition secretary, Kyle, SD. (Photo: Uzoma Obasi)

Many Tribal Nations have strong and growing economies.[9] Tribal Nations and their affiliated entities employ almost 350,000 workers and indirectly support an additional 600,000 jobs. These jobs generate $40 billion per year in wages and benefits along with an additional $9 billion spillover impact in state and regional economies.

In some cases, the burgeoning economy on a reservation becomes the economic driver of the entire region. Megan Minoka Hill (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), senior director of the Project on Indigenous Governance and Development and director of the Honoring Nations program at the Harvard Kennedy School, works with many Tribal Nations, including the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and sees a similar pattern. "At 8 a.m., there is a traffic jam going onto the reservation from people going to work, from every background you can imagine," she says. "It's because the Tribal Nations are often the economic engines of their regions and are able to provide all these jobs."

Getting Smart as You Engage

In the process of our research, we often heard frustration with the pervasive lack of understanding about Native America by philanthropic funders. "There are a lot of smart people who work in philanthropy, and yet so many of them have little to no understanding for how Native people have come to be in our current society," says Dr. Dana Arviso (Diné), director of Indigenous programs at the Decolonizing Wealth Project. "I think that non-Native people equate Native people and poverty as synonymous without interrogating the history of the United States, without understanding that settler colonialism, land theft, and extraction of natural resources are what caused poverty."

Our interviewees urge funders to do their homework and not burden Native Peoples with that work. Many Native leaders shared that constantly being expected to serve as educators is exhausting and retraumatizing. A wealth of helpful resources exist—including many written by Native-led, Native-serving organizations—for funders ready to lean in. (See for example, NAP's Five Rs of Indigenous Philanthropy and our short list of Get Smart Resources, both at the end of this section.)

Several themes emerged in our interviews around some essential, baseline understandings about Native communities for non-Native philanthropy to embrace. Our non-exhaustive starter list of these understandings includes the following.

Sovereignty, self-determination, and nation building are central to understanding and engaging with Native communities. Federally recognized Tribes are sovereign nations that have jurisdiction over their citizens regarding laws and regulations, taxes, and legal processes.

LISTEN: Kevin Walker (non-Native) of the Northwest Area Foundation on funders reckoning with the history

According to the National Congress of American Indians: "The essence of tribal sovereignty is the ability to govern and to protect and enhance the health, safety, and welfare of tribal citizens within tribal territory."[10]

The idea of sovereignty extends beyond intergovernmental affairs to cultural and economic spheres such as managing food systems and data about Native Peoples. Sovereignty is not something that can be granted, revoked, or reclaimed. It is inherent to Tribal Nations and their Peoples. However, even today many Tribes continue to fight for their sovereignty to be recognized by public authorities and/or defend their sovereignty from encroachment by others, including public and private interests.

"Everything should be seen through the lens of sovereignty, whether you're engaging directly with a Tribal community or through an intermediary," says AlexAnna Salmon (Yup'ik, Aleut), president of the Igiugig Village Council, explaining that workforce development programs can be seen as a means of economic sovereignty or language programs as a form of nation building. "[Sovereignty] will center the goals of our Tribal Nation—to sustain and thrive in place. It hits on everything. It hits on well-being, succession planning, and intergenerational leadership. It's holding that asset for the community to have in perpetuity."

Deeply intertwined with the concept of sovereignty is the principle of self-determination, which extends to all Native people whether enrolled in a Tribe or not. Rooted in the imperatives of Tribal sovereignty, Native self-determination means that Native Peoples can and should make their own choices about their well-being, their lifeways, and their assets. As such, self-determination is both an end and a means to an end.

In the context of the contemporary US legal system, for Tribes to embrace their sovereignty and advance the interests of their citizens, they must undertake a wide and complex array of activities related to politics, economics, and culture to maintain vibrant societies for their Peoples. They must build enduring nations that can survive and self-sustain generations into the future. The holistic, long-term Nations-building work required in Tribal communities is fundamentally different from programmatic investments that a non-Native funder might make outside of Native communities. Nations-building work might call for investments in physical infrastructure, cultural preservation, and Tribal government capacity—all work that is rarely, if ever, embraced by philanthropic funders.

Heterogeneity and diversity. There is no monolithic Native community. Each Tribe and community has a distinct history, culture, belief system, language, and system of government as well as land holdings and access to resources and power. Unique characteristics constitute substantive differences between Native communities and from non-Native communities. "There's no such thing as Native American life—there's only Native American lives," said the Ojibwe writer David Treuer, who referred to this as "radical diversity." He added, "We had diversity before Europeans came here. We kept it."[11]

LISTEN: AlexAnna Salmon (Yup'ik, Aleut) of the Igiugig Village Council on sovereignty

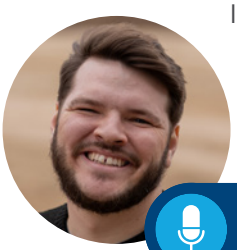
"INDIGENUITY"

"We're very creative, very innovative, because of the circumstances in which we live. We call it 'indigenuity.'"

ALEXANNA SALMON (YUP'IK, ALEUT), PRESIDENT, IGIUGIG VILLAGE COUNCIL

Federal funding has long been insufficient to meet the needs of the diverse array of recognized Tribal Nations. This federal funding is tied to historical treaty obligations the US government has made with Tribal Nations for their land—a government-to-government relationship unique from other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Importantly, the federal government, in its failure to recognize approximately 400 Tribes—the full diversity of Native America—cuts those communities off from federal resources.[12]

Indigenous innovation. Tribal Nations each constitute holistic ecosystems in which Native people for millennia have developed innovative, resourceful ways to solve universal challenges, ranging from conservation and sustainable, regenerative food systems to economic development and governance. "We're very creative, very innovative, because of the circumstances in which we live. We call it 'indigenuity,'" says Salmon of the Igiugig Village Council.



Hill of the Project on Indigenous Governance and Development and the Honoring Nations program points to a recent example around innovations in governance in Tribal communities that could be broadly transferable. "There is a renaissance in Indian Country[13] having to do with constitutional reform," she says, explaining that Tribal Nations are reclaiming their forms of government in contemporary ways to meet the needs of their citizens. "You see around the world, particularly with countries where a government failed and left a power vacuum, people come together to restore systems. We get calls from the World Bank and other institutions saying, 'Hey, we're working with this community. What can we learn from what Indian Country is doing in that regard?'"

Resilience and healing. Despite centuries of colonization, genocide, and incursions on their sovereignty, Native communities endure and flourish. Dominant narratives about Native Peoples in the United States often subvert and divert attention from this resilience with wrong-headed tropes of tragedy, powerlessness, and even extinction. Native leaders we interviewed inspire with a different framing: we are still here; we have always been here; we will continue to be here.

To funders, the advice that comes from that framing can be direct. "We don't need your sympathy—we need understanding," says RJ Martinez (Santa Clara Pueblo), early childhood director of partnerships at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Foundation. "We want you to understand our resilience, what we still have, [and] how we still hold on to it."

LISTEN: Brian Barlow (Cherokee Nation) of Native Americans in Philanthropy on the role of philanthropy in healing

National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC

Get Smart Resources

There are a variety of helpful resources for funders to learn more about Native communities, including many written by Native-led, Native-serving organizations. Here are just a few:

- **Native Americans in Philanthropy and Candid's "Native 101" timeline**: A chronological timeline written by Dr. Karina Walters, showing historically traumatic events, settler colonial policies, and Native resistance movements.[14]
- *Decolonizing Wealth:* Edgar Villanueva's book analyzing the colonialist dynamics at play in non-Native philanthropy and presenting seven steps to healing and decolonizing.[15]
- The **National Congress of American Indians'** Tribal Nations primer: A basic overview of the history and underlying principles of Tribal governance.[16]
- **The National Museum of the American Indian's** Native Knowledge 360° Essential Understandings about American Indians: A framework to create new student learning experiences on the diverse cultures, histories, and contemporary lives of Native Peoples.[17]

Edgar Villanueva, founder and CEO of the Decolonizing Wealth Project, argues that philanthropic relationships, power sharing, and funding can serve as medicine to heal the intergenerational trauma inflicted on people of color and specifically Native and Black communities. It is a forceful argument for land return, reparations, and power building.

"It's important for us as we're doing this work, and as funders are doing this work, to collect the data, advance the research, work with communities," says Emily Edenshaw (Yup'ik, Iñupiaq), president and CEO of the Alaska Native Heritage Center. "[But] we also have to normalize the healing."

• • •

While Native leaders underscored the importance of funders doing their homework and deepening their understanding of the history and context of Native communities, they also urged funders not to linger in a prolonged learning journey that gets in the way of action. ***Part Two*** *presents a set of ready entry points for funders to act now.*

Endnotes

1 Throughout this report, we share the Tribal identities of interviewees.

2 Native Nations are independent nations within a nation. The term "Nation" shows respect for sovereignty and the fact that Native Nations each have their own systems of government. Source: Twyla Baker, Wizipan Little Elk, Bryan Pollard, and Margaret Yellow Bird, "How to Talk About Native Nations: A Guide," Native Governance Center, May 27, 2021. In this report, we also refer directly to Tribal governments.

3 "Facts for Features: National Native American Heritage Month: November 2024," United States Census Bureau, October 25, 2024.

4 *Constitution, By-Laws & Standing Rules of Order*, National Congress of American Indians, October 2019.

5 "Federally Recognized Indian Tribes and Resources for Native Americans," USAGov, accessed March 31, 2025.

6 *Indian Issues: Federal Funding for Non-Federally Recognized Tribes*, US Government Accountability Office, April 2012.

7 *Native Language Revitalization: Literature Review*, Bureau of Indian Affairs, August 2023.

8 "Native American Ownership and Governance of Natural Resources," US Department of the Interior Office of Natural Resources Revenue, accessed March 31, 2025.

9 Patrice H. Kunesh, "The Power of Self-Determination in Building Sustainable Economies in Indian Country," Advancing Anti-Racist Economic Research and Policy, Economic Policy Institute, June 15, 2022.

10 *Tribal Nations and the United States: An Introduction*, National Congress of American Indians, February 2020.

11 David Treuer, "Author David Treuer on Rewriting the Native American Narrative," interview by Jeffrey Brown, *PBS News Hour*, PBS, May 2, 2019.

12 Eilis O'Neill, "Unrecognized Tribes Struggle Without Federal Aid During Pandemic," NPR, April 17, 2021.

13 US law recognizes various types of "Indian Country": reservations, informal reservations, dependent Indian communities, allotments, and special designations. To be recognized as Indian Country, the land must either be within an Indian reservation or be federal trust land (land owned by the federal government but held in trust for a Tribe or Tribal member). Source: "What Is Indian Country?" Indian Country Criminal Jurisdiction - by Native.law, accessed April 4, 2025.

14 Karina Walters, "History Through a Native Lens," Investing in Native Communities, accessed April 4, 2025.

15 Edgar Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*, 2nd ed., (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021).

16 *Tribal Nations and the United States: An Introduction*, National Congress of American Indians.

17 *Essential Understandings about American Indians*, National Museum of the American Indian's Native Knowledge 360°, accessed April 4, 2025.

The Five Rs

RESPECT
RECIPROCITY
RESPONSIBILITY
RELATIONSHIPS
REDISTRIBUTION

Values of Indigenous Philanthropy

Scholars such as LaDonna Harris (Comanche Nation), founder and president of Americans for Indian Opportunity, have identified and documented hallmarks of the Indigenous worldview that are common across Indigenous communities around the world. These characteristics of "indigeneity"—taken individually or collectively—frame values and approaches distinctive from Western cultures. Native Americans in Philanthropy, building on the work of International Funders for Indigenous Peoples, has adapted these hallmarks into a framework of Five Rs[1] for philanthropy to embrace Indigenous ways that could lead to greater impact across all grantee relationships. The Five Rs are outlined below with examples of how they have been exhibited in philanthropy.

LISTEN: Dr. Dana Arviso (Diné) of the Decolonizing Wealth Project on the Five Rs

1 Brittany Schulman, "Listening and the Fives Rs of Indigenous Philanthropy," Fund for Shared Insight, November 21, 2024.

RESPECT **Honor the cultural values and traditions of Native communities. Additionally, demonstrating an understanding of the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism and oppression is also important.**

A program officer from the Schmidt Family Foundation recently joined a NACA Inspired Schools Network convening of Native education leaders to learn more about land-based learning. She showed up and she leaned in—rolling up her sleeves to help with a buffalo harvest. "She was literally cleaning the taniga, the guts of the buffalo," says Anpao Duta Flying Earth (Lakota, Dakota, Ojibwe, and Akimel O'odham), executive director of the NACA Inspired Schools Network. "Many of us were more on the hide or trying to get the skull, but no, she was like, 'I'll do it. I'm down.' That meant a lot. That kind of walking the walk matters."

RECIPROCITY **Share and receive resources and knowledge with Native Peoples in a way that embodies a balanced exchange between all parties.**

Some funders have transformed their organizational values and redefined success based on what they learned from Native partners. This can involve reconsidering the fundamentals of a dominant worldview and restructuring internal frameworks to facilitate investment in Native communities. NDN Collective, for example, has been influential in helping reframe for non-Native philanthropy the idea of wealth. "To many Native Peoples, wealth means something very different from our foundation's initial definitions of it," says John Fetzer (White Earth Ojibwe Nation), program officer at the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAF). "It was important that we moved away from concepts focusing on finances and poverty toward those that support prosperity as Native communities understand it. It means we're strong in our culture, our languages are thriving, and generations are connected again."

RESPONSIBILITY **Make funding decisions in a way that is accountable to Native communities.**

Funders most respected for their work with Native communities commit over long-term horizons. Instead of conventional short-term, restricted grantmaking, the NWAF entered 10-year-long partnerships with several communities. It has a track record of making commitments and following through. "What I've learned in working with Native organizations, getting into a real relationship means showing up again and again, listening before you talk, leaning into their strategy and their vision instead of imposing yours," says Kevin Walker (non-Native), president and CEO of the NWAF. "All of these things that many of us would say, 'Well, that's just good philanthropy.' It's even more important in a Native context."

RELATIONSHIPS **Share power and decision making with Native communities.**

Relationships develop when funders show up and listen with humility and gratitude. "Northwest Area Foundation really understands deep listening to what we need as communities—it was never prescribed," 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 predominantly serving Native communities. "Often you'll find within philanthropy, they structure programs how they think it should be done, and we fit into those confines of thought forms and philosophies."

REDISTRIBUTION **Influence processes and structures that will direct funding to Native leaders.**

The origins of great wealth in the United States that allow for philanthropy are directly or indirectly linked to the exploitation of land and natural resources as well as labor. All US land was once occupied by Native Peoples, and all national resources were stewarded by Native Americans. Many Native leaders urge funders to reckon with that reality. "Philanthropy needs to be reframed as redistributing resources to us from the economic gains made from what has been taken deliberately from us," says Alvin Warren (Santa Clara Pueblo), vice president of policy and impact at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Foundation.

PART TWO **BRIGHT SPOTS**

Entry Points for Funders to Support Native Communities

> **"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.

RESPECTING TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY

"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."

DR. ZEINAB CHAHINE (NON-NATIVE),
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT,
CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES,
CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS

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."

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

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.

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

"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

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.

JUST DO IT

Pathways to Get Started Right Now

For philanthropists who seek ideas for immediate engagement and investment, our research and conversations surfaced several ready opportunities, which we outline below.

⏭ Partner with effective intermediaries.

Find and fund the national, regional, and inter-Tribal intermediaries already providing resources and services to Native communities. “Acknowledge that you don’t have the existing capacity or knowledge to do it yourself,” says Dr. Dana Arviso (Diné), director of Indigenous programs at the Decolonizing Wealth Project. “Instead, move resources through someone that does have those relationships, that knowledge, that ability.”

⏭ Invest in cultural cultivation and preservation.

Resource the organizations and individuals working to preserve Native culture, including language, for future generations. The cultural creation and preservation happening in Native communities is inextricably tied to sovereignty and Nations building. “We diminish the identity of culture bearers when we attempt to categorize them within the philanthropy space,” says Lori Pourier (Oglala Lakota), founder and senior fellow of First Peoples Fund, noting that there is no word for art in Native languages. For these culture bearers, she explains: “There’s no line between field builder, change maker, nor in areas of health, language, community development, or education. It is those creatives who are deeply connected to the ecosystems of Native cultures.”

Invest in economic prosperity.

Fund Native-led community development financial institutions (CDFIs), rooted in local communities, that provide access to capital and other financial services to Native businesses, organizations, and households. In December 2024, MacKenzie Scott's Yield Giving awarded more than $103 million in unrestricted funding to Native CDFIs across the country—one of the largest single investments in Native financial institutions.[1]

"There's a wealth building of possibilities, a wealth building of courage," says Chrystel Cornelius (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians), CEO and president of Oweesta Corporation. "For any individual to walk into a CDFI and have the bravery to ask for help, to want something more, when their whole life, they've been told no, you're taking this chance of vulnerability. That's the impact that we're looking for. That's community change."

Fund Tribal-affiliated institutions. Funding Tribal colleges, Tribal universities, and other Tribal institutions is similar to funding non-Tribally affiliated counterparts. "Native CDFIs and Tribal colleges would be the two low-hanging fruit that I always lead with," says Kevin Walker (non-Native), president and CEO of the Northwest Area Foundation. "Those are entities that any funder can understand, a hurdle that should be clearable for anybody who wants to find a place to start."

Fund urban Indian organizations.

The nonprofits providing health and social services—including traditional healing practices—to Native families outside of Tribal lands are critical players in both service and cultural provision for urban Native people. "There are over 450 urban Native nonprofits serving urban Native communities," says Janeen Comenote (Quinault, Hesquiaht, Oglala), founding executive director of the National Urban Indian Family Coalition. "On average, only about 3 to 5 percent of their budgets comes from philanthropy. Most of these culturally based human services orgs get their money from what we call 'civic funding'—city, county, state, and federal service contracts. Our organizations often feel overlooked by philanthropy."

Invest in Native rights and power-building organizations that support Native people and Tribal Nations through legal services, advocacy, and movement building.

Ska-xjeing-ga Vicky Stott (Ho-Chunk Nation), a senior program officer with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, described the range of power-building investment it makes in Native communities, including civic engagement and voter education work. "There's an important responsibility with investing in the infrastructure of Native movement building, the organizing work on the ground that has not always been invested in by other funders," she says. "It's connected back to Tribal sovereignty and Native people being able to define for ourselves what we hope for our communities."

1 Brian Edwards, "MacKenzie Scott awards more than $100M to Native CDFIs," *Tribal Business News*, December 18, 2024.

PART THREE BIGGER, BOLDER

Next-Level Opportunities to Support Native Communities

> "Philanthropy can invest in outside-the-box initiatives and thinking."
>
> JANEEN COMENOTE (QUINAULT INDIAN NATION), FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL URBAN INDIAN FAMILY COALITION

Since its founding in 2003, the National Urban Indian Family Coalition has been a leading voice in building awareness of and advocating for urban Native communities. Its network of more than 40 Native-led, Native-serving organizations across 22 states has built a movement for integrating urban Native issues—like education reform and civic engagement—into national policy discussions.

Fundamentally, the National Urban Indian Family Coalition is a power-building organization. Janeen Comenote (Quinault Indian Nation[1]), its founding executive director, believes funders are critical to that mission. "Invest in our Tribes, our organizations, and our individuals so that we can also live our best lives within our communities and have the organized power to make those things happen within the larger American culture that we live in," says Comenote.

For ambitious funders with an appetite for greater complexity and longer time horizons, our conversations with Native leaders surfaced some bolder investment opportunities—systemic solutions that could be transformative for Native and non-Native communities alike.

Giving Boldly

There is an abundance of opportunities with great impact potential for funders interested in investing in Native communities. Based on our discussions with Native leaders, here is a small sample of existing and emerging options for those funders hoping to increase their level of commitment.

CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

To foster a greater understanding of Native communities, harmful narratives about Native people must be addressed. There is an opportunity for philanthropy to make long-term investments in storytelling and narrative-change initiatives that work to end endemic misconceptions and bias against Native communities.

"To shift narratives, you have to really understand your audience; do opinion polling, focus groups, and research about what people think [in order] to understand the stories that are in an audience's brain and uncover those not just within the individual but in the systemic narratives," says Betsy Richards (Cherokee Nation), executive director of the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine, and

LISTEN: Corrina Gould (Lisjan Ohlone) of the Confederated Villages of Lisjan Nation and the Sogorea Te' Land Trust on Native-led nonprofits with resources to dream

Previous page: Nichole June Maher (Tlingit, Haida), president and CEO of Inatai Foundation, talks to community/grantee leaders at an event in Pasco, WA. (Photo: Ulysses Curry)

in Acadia National Park, which advances greater understanding of and support for Wabanaki Nations' heritage, living cultures, and homelands. "Then we can construct new narratives built on that information."

For the past seven years, IllumiNative has worked tirelessly to increase the visibility of—and challenge narratives about—Native Peoples. They did this through amplifying contemporary Native voices and stories to mobilize support for key Native issues. IllumiNative recently announced it will be sunsetting. The loss will leave a hole in Native-led narrative efforts as IllumiNative's work found great success on the national level. For instance, the organization was critical in successfully getting the racist name of the Washington National Football League team changed. The sunsetting emphasizes the need for philanthropy to support Native-led narrative-change organizations and to build up this much-needed infrastructure.

PARTNER WITH TRIBAL NATIONS

Tribal Nations provide essential programs and services in their communities, many of which are rural and lack access to other providers. While Tribal Nations receive some funding from the federal government, it typically is insufficient to meet community needs. Unlike state or local governments, Tribes cannot levy income taxes or property taxes on their citizens. There's an obvious gap here that provides an opportunity for philanthropy.

An increasing number of foundations are deepening their partnerships with Tribal leaders by making unrestricted grants directly to Tribal Nations for broad nation-building work. First Nations Development Institute's Charitable and Sovereign resource provides helpful guidance on how funders can make charitable contributions directly to Tribal governments.[2] The Bush Foundation, for instance, supports Tribal governance strengthening in the 23 Native Nations in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota, an effort that started in 2008 and culminated in the creation of the independent, Native-led nonprofit Native Governance Center.

Tribal Nations themselves are also making efforts to connect with philanthropists. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) is the oldest and largest American Indian and Alaska Native organization in the United States.[3] It essentially serves as an embassy of Native Peoples in Washington, DC. Beyond its strong orientation toward engaging the federal government, NCAI has also embraced the role of philanthropy. The recently launched NCAI Foundation drives philanthropic resources toward four areas: upholding Tribal sovereignty, empowering Tribal leadership, cultivating youth leadership, and fortifying Tribal Nations. Native leaders also urged philanthropy to support the geographically diverse array of regional inter-Tribal organizations.

ELEVATE NATIVE INDIGENUITY

Indigenuity, as described by Native scholar Dr. Daniel Wildcat[4] and others, refers to the application of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom to solve contemporary problems, emphasizing

LISTEN: Betsy Richards (Cherokee Nation) of Abbe Museum on narrative-change work

a deep connection to land, air, and water, and respectful kinship with the world. At a time of multiple overlapping crises in the United States and globally, Native indigenuity can be a powerful source of innovative solutions. For example, as wildfires become more frequent and ferocious across arid parts of Western states, there is increased interest in the traditional ecological knowledge that Native people employed successfully for millennia to manage fire risk. In 2023, the State of California announced $19 million in grant funding to support Tribal government–led wildfire-resilience efforts.[5]

"We come from communities of genius since time immemorial," says Anpao Duta Flying Earth (Lakota, Dakota, Ojibwe, and Akimel O'odham), executive director of the NACA Inspired Schools Network, a Native-led network of schools. "It's up to us to push the edge of what we know to be true and possible."

There is a tremendous opportunity for philanthropy to help resource an ecosystem where Native indigenuity can thrive and where non-Native communities can learn from both traditional practices and the emerging innovations borne from those practices.

In Oregon's Columbia River Basin, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation undertook an ambitious project that illustrates indigenuity in action: Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten). "As an act of sovereignty, the Tribe brought every living person that had ever done research there back to the reservation to reclaim that knowledge," shares Megan Minoka Hill (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), senior director of the Project on Indigenous Governance and Development and director of the Honoring Nations program at the Harvard Kennedy School. In one instance, a non-Native anthropologist, who had spent 30 years with elders researching the region, shared the firsthand accounts he had collected, including more than 1,000 traditional place names. So began a 12-year process to record Native place names to create an ethnographic atlas from historical documents and interviews with elders about their homeland, with linked coordinates in the Tribes' geographic information system mapping database.

The Confederated Tribes rely on the wealth of knowledge captured in Čáw Pawá Láakni to set priorities, develop environmental policy, and manage resources. "They're using it to reinforce treaty rights, for language learning, to develop strategies for climate-change mitigation, and transmission of traditional knowledge," says Hill. "With this one act of sovereignty, they reclaimed what's theirs to strengthen and build their Nation in a multitude of ways."

RESOURCE INDIGENUITY

"We come from communities of genius since time immemorial. It's up to us to push the edge of what we know to be true and possible."

ANPAO DUTA FLYING EARTH (LAKOTA, DAKOTA, OJIBWE, AND AKIMEL O'ODHAM), EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NACA INSPIRED SCHOOLS NETWORK

UNLOCK PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FUNDING

Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to leverage federal resources and reshape private market capital to foster sustainable economic and community development in Indian Country.[6] Through grants, program-related investments, and mission-related investments, private capital can be incentivized to invest in Native communities. Existing federal funding will provide additional resources while supporting capacity building and replicable models for Tribes across the country.

Two newly launched initiatives illustrate what's possible when philanthropy engages in this work. The Indigenous Futures Fund, announced in February 2024, hopes to raise $2 million in grants and over $25 million in credit to mobilize private investment capital to accelerate the flow of federal and private funds to Native entrepreneurs and Tribal enterprises, and increase the capacity of Native community development financial institutions (CDFIs). The Tribal Community Vision Partnership seeks to change how capital flows into Indian Country. The partnership centers the role of philanthropy as a catalyst for leveraging existing federal funds and reassuring capital markets to build community and develop economies. "We are excited to introduce this innovative approach to Tribal self-determination and philanthropy engagement," says Erik Stegman (Carry the Kettle First Nation—Nakoda) CEO of Native Americans in Philanthropy.

"There's a lot of Native-led nonprofits that are essentially doing this integral community development work," says Chrystel Cornelius (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians), president and CEO of Oweesta Corporation, the longest-standing national Native CDFI intermediary, which often offers loans when conventional lenders will not. Cornelius sees a similar role for philanthropy: "I think philanthropy can show up to provide bridge capital. If you can get more equity into a project, you're able to leverage more investment."

SUPPORT LAND RETURN INITIATIVES

Philanthropy can provide the capital needed for land return transactions, which restore ownership or stewardship of land to ancestral inhabitants. Land is fundamental to sovereignty, cultural preservation, and nation building—critical to thriving Native communities. These land transactions often emerge with a tight timeline and require nimble support.

"Land title is somewhat like the ring of power in *The Lord of the Rings*," says Jodi Archambault (Hunkpapa, Oglala Lakota), president and CEO of Anpo. With that in mind, her hope is that in the next 10 years, "a million acres [will be] returned to Indigenous people."

Although traditionally philanthropy has been reluctant to fund land return efforts, there are some signs of philanthropic engagement. Regional funders, especially, are recognizing the needs of Native communities in their geographical areas, including the interconnectedness of land to thriving Native communities.

"In 2020, there weren't a lot of examples of Land Back, but now we've seen so many different ways foundations are supporting Land Back here in California," says Dr. Dana Arviso (Diné), director of Indigenous programs at the Decolonizing Wealth Project, which made its first round of grants under the California Tribal Land Return initiative.

INDIGENIZE EDUCATION

> "Imagine if we were able to fully define higher education for ourselves and not have it framed through a Western dominant, colonial lens."
>
> SKA-XJEING-GA VICKY STOTT (HO-CHUNK NATION), SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER, W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

For instance, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust and its allies launched a campaign in 2015 to engage Bay Area foundations in a unique means of support: the Shuumi Land Tax. Eight foundations signed on during the first year, and it has grown steadily since; in March 2024, the Kataly Foundation contributed $20 million.[7]

In April 2024, the Yurok Tribe entered into an agreement with the Save the Redwoods League, the National Park Service, and California State Parks to return 125 acres to the Tribe—ancestral land taken by white settlers during the Gold Rush.[8] The Yurok Tribe will comanage the parcel with the National Park Service and California State Parks as a gateway to Redwood National and State Parks. The following month, the Wilton Rancheria Tribe regained control of a 77-acre parcel of its ancestral land near Sacramento.[9]

INDIGENIZE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Investing in accredited Native-led educational institutions and structures that reflect Indigenous values, culture, and language can break harmful cycles and misperceptions. "Imagine if we were able to fully define higher education for ourselves and not have it framed through a Western dominant, colonial lens," says Ska-xjeing-ga Vicky Stott (Ho-Chunk Nation), a senior program officer at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. "That could go a long way to break through cycles of colonialism that have continued to hold Tribes and Native communities back in terms of how we define our own sense of agency, how we even perceive our own sense of wisdom, expertise, and goodness that every single one of our communities brings forward."

In May 2024, Oklahoma State University celebrated a historic first—the inaugural graduating class in a physician training program on a Native American reservation, in affiliation with a Tribal government. The College of Osteopathic Medicine at the Cherokee Nation education is a blend of Western medicine and traditional Native healing practices—a model for a new approach that indigenizes education. It's worth noting that osteopathic medicine—as well as the 42 osteopathic medical schools now accrediting physicians in the United States—is heavily influenced by Indigenous knowledge.[10]

Another example is the growing NACA Inspired Schools Network—now 13 schools in five states, each designed by Native communities, rooted in their values and connection to the land. Each school has a rigorous college prep curriculum that promotes Native culture, identity, and community investment.

PROMOTE THRIVING NATIVE LANGUAGES

When we asked Native leaders what they envisioned in the future, the resurgence of Native languages came up time and time again. "If we lose our language, we lose our culture," says Lori Pourier (Oglala Lakota), founder and senior fellow of First Peoples Fund. "There's this amazing resurgence right now. Philanthropy has an opportunity here to really step up."

Northwest Area Foundation President and CEO Kevin Walker (center) talks to school staff at Maȟpíya Lúta, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located on the Pine Ridge Reservation, home to the Oglala Lakȟóta (Sioux) Tribe. Its comprehensive Lakȟóta language curriculum gives K-12 youth an opportunity to "learn and embrace their language." (Photo: Steve Wewerka)

Despite systematic efforts by the federal government to erase Native languages, fluency is on the rise among Native youth. Still, of the 167 Indigenous languages spoken in the United States today, the Bureau of Indian Affairs estimates that only 20 may remain by 2050.[11] The language education and immersion programs that fuel rebirth and renewal are severely underfunded as they too often fall outside of conventional philanthropy's siloed issue-based approach.

First Nations Development Institute's Native Language Immersion Initiative supports new generations of Native American language speakers and helps Native communities establish infrastructure and models for replicable Native language immersion programs. The Lakota Language Consortium, which supports the revitalization and preservation of the Lakȟótiyapi language by developing curricula and training teachers, reaches over 20,000 students in more than 60 schools.

BOLSTER DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

Inaccuracy of grantmaking data related to Native communities remains a challenge. Philanthropy can support Native-led data projects that track needs and impact in Native communities and hold philanthropy accountable to their commitments. While some datasets do not track Native-related activity at all, others track it with loose definitions of what is "Native-led" and "Native-serving." Although this issue over what defines an organization led by people of color can affect any community (e.g., it could lead to overestimation of the amounts of funding an organization receives), the issue can be particularly pronounced for Native communities. Added complexities include recognized and unrecognized Tribes, Tribally governed nonprofits and US-recognized nongovernmental organizations and Indigenous people from other parts of the world, along with the general lack of data for Native communities.

LISTEN: Jodi Archambault (Hunkpapa, Oglala Lakota) of Anpo on revitalizing Native language

"We don't yet have all the tools or accountability that we need," says Nichole June Maher (Tlingit, Haida), president and CEO of Inatai Foundation. "A grant that should be counted to an Indigenous community needs to be led by and for Native people, and assets purchased are retained under Indigenous control."

For instance, Maher explains, grants to construct buildings on a university campus should not be considered an investment in Native communities just because Native students may use the facility. "It is not a grant that creates an asset, an ownership in an Indigenous community," she says.

In 2017, when the Bush Foundation decided to review its Native-focused work across all its program areas, it found notable discrepancies in how data were collected and coded over decades.[12] The foundation reviewed its archives as far back as 1970 to meticulously clean data to provide an accurate picture of the foundation's Native-focused funding over time and found surprising fluctuations. These findings helped improve its process for coding grants and tracking demographic information—for all groups—thus ensuring that the foundation is more intentional in its approach to reaching Native communities.

FOSTER NON-NATIVE FUNDER LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

Philanthropy can continue to deepen investment in Native-led foundations and intermediaries to help them develop their capacity for responsible grantmaking within Native communities. Their decades of collective experience could help attract and educate foundations and program officers new to funding in Native communities. "When learning how to engage with an Indigenous Tribe, there's no manual, there's no playbook," says AlexAnna Salmon (Yup'ik and Aleut), president of the Igiugig Village Council.

FOSTER LEARNING

"When learning how to engage with an Indigenous Tribe, there's no manual, there's no playbook."

ALEXANNA SALMON (YUP'IK AND ALEUT), PRESIDENT, IGIUGIG VILLAGE COUNCIL

In the summer of 2024, Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) partnered with Alaska Venture Fund and brought a group of 10 peer funders to Igiugig Village in Alaska to explore how their support could be transformative for Native communities. "It was the best experience of my life," one of the funders told President Salmon. (See Erik Stegman's recent article on the value of such funder trips and the importance of human-centered impact measurement.[13])

Native Voices Rising, a collaborative grantmaking initiative created by Common Counsel Foundation and NAP, prioritizes funder organizing and funder education. In the spring of 2024, its inaugural Funder Learning Fellowship convened 10 foundation program officers to begin to build a community of practice. The hope is that "they can understand what it means to build power in Native communities through examples of some of our grant partners," explains Arviso, who was Native Voices Rising's program strategist at the time but now leads Indigenous programs at the Decolonizing Wealth Project. "Whether that's around creating clean energy initiatives in Tribal communities, building the next generation of Native political leaders, or doing language revitalization work."

On Sept. 25, 2019, Winnemem Wintu tribe members and allies held a protest at the Shasta Dam Visitor Center, to demand a display that would educate the public about the destruction to the land, salmon, and Indigenous people brought on by Shasta Dam. Chief Caleen Sisk photographed a topographic map of Shasta Dam and its tributaries, including the McCloud River, homeland of the Winnemem Wintu people. (Photo: ©Tom Levy/www.tomlevy.net)

Expanding What's Possible for Shared Abundance

Many Native leaders we spoke with suggested that truly transformative change begins when philanthropy embraces Indigenous values and ways in its own work.

Over a century ago, the US Bureau of Reclamation, which oversees water resources in the Western states, built Shasta Dam in Northern California—an infrastructure project so large it required the construction of the world's largest cement plant and nearly 5,000 around-the clock laborers.[14] It became integral to the entire economy of California—which now, if a nation, would be the fifth largest in the world.

It also devastated the Winnemem Wintu, a Tribe that for over a millennium had made their home on the banks of the McCloud River.[15] The dam project flooded 30,000 acres,[16] including 90 percent of their ancestral territory.[17] Cultural sites, burial grounds, and whole villages vanished in the wake of a state-directed economic development undertaking that treated local Native people as invisible and expendable. By 2023, the Tribe held just 42 acres.[18]

Back in the spring of 2023, Donna Bransford (non-Native), senior program officer at the Kataly Foundation, met Chief Caleen Sisk, the spiritual leader and Tribal chief of the Winnemem Wintu, who at the time was working to reclaim over 1,000 acres of ancestral land from a willing seller. "Our ancestors have told me we will be successful," Bransford remembers Sisk telling her. Says Bransford: "She made it very clear that she was not asking for my help. She was inviting me to join her—to be part of something bigger than myself or any foundation."

That's quite a different balance of power and motivation than what is commonly seen in conventional philanthropy. Bransford eagerly embraced Sisk's mutual-benefit framing as she rallied her peer funders to also support the effort to reclaim the land. "Who wouldn't want to be part of that?" asks Bransford.

On Indigenous Peoples' Day in 2023, the Winnemem Wintu regained control[19] of a substantial tract of 1,080 acres of their ancestral homelands. "They're now once again the rightful stewards of this land," says Bransford. "That will mean people living in California are in a different relationship with this land. That will mean the salmon will once again have a chance to thrive in these rivers. That's incredibly important for Chief Caleen's grandchildren and her future generations, but I also believe it's important for my 10-year-old son and for my future grandchildren. What will these shifts mean for all of us? I want to live in the world she is creating."

Imagine the impact of a philanthropic model that joins—not "helps"—Native people in that ongoing project of creating a world shaped by the Five Rs: respect, reciprocity, responsibility, redistribution, and relationships.

Endnotes

1 Throughout this report, we share the Tribal identities of interviewees.
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