LEADING STRATEGIES

Culture First: An Indigenous Rooted SEM Framework

By Lisa Silverstein, Delphina Thomas, and Cedric B. Howard

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are redefining strategic enrollment management. Through the Cultivating Native Student Success initiative, TCUs focus on capacity building using an Indigenous approach to strategic enrollment management centered on the unique cultural values inherent at each TCU to increase American Indian and Alaska Natives (AIAN) visibility, representation, and degree attainment in higher education. These culturally based practices inform a re-visioned SEM framework with an approach where campus and community-wide cultural belongingness is at the core.

As enrollment management marks 50 years since its origins in the mid-1970s (Hossler 2015), the field is being called to widen its lens beyond the mainstream institutions that shaped its first half-century. A distinct and transformative strategic enrollment management (SEM) model is emerging across Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), one that centers Indigenous knowledge, kinship and accountability, and culture embedded as the foundation for student success. SEM at mainstream or predominantly white institutions (PWIs) often emphasizes marketing, enrollment, and recruitment practices grounded in Western ideologies (Hossler and Bontrager 2014). This Indigenous-rooted SEM framework is not an adaptation of traditional SEM practices, rather, it centers the Indigenous wisdom and values that TCUs were founded on (Boyer 2015). It represents an approach to SEM with a paradigm rooted in tribal sovereignty, relationality, and holistic student development. The student journey at TCUs is shaped by cultural identity, community belonging, and intergenerational responsibility inherent in their missions, requiring SEM systems that honor these lived realities (Boyer 2015; Howard 2025; Nelson 2017; Silverstein, Gusbeth, and Breaker 2023; Youngbull and Sanders 2024). As historically marginalized student populations continue to increase in higher education, considering a framework that centers cultural identity and belonging supports traditional SEM values of increasing and sustaining enrollment, retention, persistence and completion by fostering holistic campus-wide integration and student success.

This shift of the traditional SEM model (Hossler 2015) is reinforced by the American Indian College

Fund's Cultivating Native Student Success (CNSS) initiative. CNSS highlights that student persistence is strengthened when institutions embed cultural values into advising, instruction, and student support; an approach aligned with the Indigenous-rooted SEM model. Participating TCUs demonstrate systemic changes, including integrated wraparound supports and community-driven SEM planning that contribute to long-term institutional transformation. Indigenous rooted SEM requires centering tribal values, engaging Elders and community members in SEM planning, and aligning enrollment strategies with Tribal workforce and nation-building priorities. This reinforces the argument that SEM at TCUs is a sovereign-affirming practice that supports individual student flourishing and collective community wellbeing (Boyer 2015; Howard 2025; Nelson 2017; Silverstein, Gusbeth, and Breaker 2023).

The collaborative work of five TCUs, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe College, Salish Kootenai College, Stone Child College, United Tribes Technical College, and Oglala Lakota College, collectively demonstrated that culture-centered SEM practices produce improvements in student engagement and persistence (Silverstein, Gusbeth, and Breaker 2023). Findings underscore that Indigenous-rooted SEM is inherently systemic: it reshapes recruitment, advising, instruction, and student services simultaneously, rather than treating them as isolated administrative functions.

Core features of the Indigenous-rooted framework are relationality and place-based learning. Relationality promotes collective accountability. Unlike traditional SEM models that prioritize numerical outcomes such as yield or retention, Indigenous-rooted SEM centers relationality as the primary mechanism for student success. Faculty, staff, Elders, and community members serve as relational anchors throughout the student journey, creating a network of support that affirms identity, belonging, and purpose. This approach, grounded in the "4 Rs" and Indigenous methodologies (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1991; LaFrance and Nichols 2009; Wilson 2008), shows learning as communal and interdependent, an essential component to Native student persistence (Silverstein, Gusbeth, and Breaker 2023).

Another core component of the emerging framework is the emphasis on place-based learning, which incorporates Tribal history, language, and cultural practices into curricula and academic pathways that often align with Tribal workforce needs. Students thrive at TCUs when learning environments reflect Indigenous worldviews (Brayboy, *et al*. 2012; Bull 2020; Santos and Tachine 2024; Youngbull and Sanders 2024). These practices represent systemic SEM transformation rather than programmatic adjustments.

These developments illustrate that TCUs are not merely adopting SEM; they are redefining it. As this Indigenous-rooted framework continues to unfold, it offers a powerful alternative to conventional SEM approaches. It provides a pathway for higher education systems seeking to honor Indigenous students, cultures, and nations.

Dual Missions—Culturally Rooted institutions

TCUs are small, mostly rural institutions located on or near reservations. They serve a majority of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) students and differ from other higher education institutions; they are sanctioned, or chartered, by Tribal governing bodies. The mission of each TCU is to serve students in ways that sustain Indigenous knowledge, language, and values. As place-based institutions, TCUs are critical in educating their tribal members and communities, utilizing their cultural values and traditional knowledge (Boyer 2015; Bull 2020; Nelson 2017). They are vital to Native student success, with goals to pursue degrees so they can give back to their communities (Brayboy, *et al*. 2012; Lopez 2021).

The American Indian College Fund supports 34 TCUs and 75 satellite campuses that are accredited members of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium across thirteen states (American Indian College Fund 2026). Collectively, they enroll 12 percent of AIAN students in higher education, 21,000 students, nationally, representing 85–96 percent of their student populations from over half of the 574 federally recognized tribes (American Indian Higher Education Con-

sortium 2025; Hanson, *et al*. 2023; U.S Department of Education 2024).

Cultivating Native Student Success (CNSS)

To increase AIAN student enrollment and degree attainment, the American Indian College Fund initiated CNSS in 2019 to support the development of SEM planning at TCUs that center Indigenous perspective reflective of their cultural missions. CNSS focuses on two overarching goals. 1) Support the capacity of TCUs to improve and develop long-term changes for sustainable programming and success in enrollment management, academic planning and expanded holistic, place-based student supports. 2) Develop campus-wide plans focused on increasing Native student enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.

CNSS is grounded in Indigenous methodologies and intergenerational education frameworks (LaFrance and Nichols 2009) and centered on TCU knowledge and practice as assets to enrollment management planning. It is guided by the "4 Rs" of Indigenous education research that include relationships, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1991; Wilson 2008).

Bontrager and Green's (2015) SEM model continues to evolve as a holistic framework that aligns institutional mission, student success, and long-term sustainability. At TCUs, SEM takes on a uniquely relational and culturally embedded character that differs markedly from mainstream college approaches. The CNSS Theory of Action incorporates reciprocity, cultural values, visibility, and regenerative impact to guide their SEM planning unique to each of their institutions.

TCU SEM Theory of Action

The CNSS Theory of Action comprises four pillars: Reciprocity and Public-Spirited Leadership, Cultural Values and Relationality, Visibility and Redistribution, and Strategic Planning with Regenerative Impact (Jorgensen 2007; Wilson 2008). Reciprocity and Public-Spirited Leadership are expressed through co-visioning processes that include students, faculty, tribal elders, and community members. This collaborative planning structure ensures that SEM outcomes reflect community values and strengthen Indigenous educational sovereignty. Cultural Values and Relationality emphasize the integration of Tribal languages, traditions, and governance structures into SEM planning, enhancing student belonging and success (Youngbull and Sanders 2024). Visibility and Redistribution reflect the importance of transparent data sharing and community engagement in SEM planning. TCUs share SEM progress through websites, TCU convenings, and national convenings, reinforcing community trust and strengthening Indigenous representation in national higher education spaces. Strategic Planning and Regenerative Impact reflect the sustainable and regenerative nature of SEM within TCUs. Planning is intergenerational and rooted in Tribal nation building, ensuring that SEM initiatives continue to support students and communities for decades (Lopez 2022). (*See* Table 1, on page 98.)

- **Reciprocity and Public-Spirited Leadership.** TCUs embed reciprocity into SEM by centering student experience through culturally informed, community-based support systems. Peer learning and cohort-based approaches are encouraged through communities of practices on shared student success priorities like first year experience and dual enrollment, and at the annual CNSS Convening, where TCU staff present on their SEM strategies and programming, deepening collaboration to collectively address enrollment management challenges (Rubeck and White Eyes 2025). This aligns with public-spirited leadership, where institutional leaders, tribal elders, faculty, students, and community members share responsibility for guiding SEM planning and implementation (Howard 2025; Jorgensen 2007).
- **Cultural Values and Relationality.** TCUs function as expressions of tribal sovereignty and educational self-determination, and their SEM strategies reflect these cultural foundations (Youngbull and Sanders 2024). Cultural values shape institutional planning and student support, making relational accountability central to enrollment management. Unlike some small community colleges that focus primarily on enrollment efficiency and market responsiveness re-

TABLE 1 ➤ Cultivating Native Student Success Theory of Action Framework[1]

Domain	Core Constructs	Strategies And Activities	Expected Outcomes
Reciprocity and Public-Spirited Leadership	▸ Co-visioning shared leadership ▸ Collective efficacy and decision-making ▸ Peer learning	▸ Implement a cohort-based SEM model that facilitates peer learning among TCUs while honoring institutional autonomy and cultural context. ▸ Offer structured opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and communities to co-create enrollment and student success strategies. ▸ Foster collaborative learning spaces for TCU leaders and practitioners to exchange challenges, innovations, and best practices.	▸ Increased institutional engagement and ownership of SEM processes. ▸ Strengthening leadership capacity and collaborative networks. ▸ Greater stakeholder participation in institutional planning. ▸ Contextually relevant and community-supported SEM plans.
Cultural Values and Relationality	▸ Indigenous knowledge systems ▸ Cultural responsiveness ▸ Relational accountability	▸ Ground SEM planning within Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, languages, and community values. ▸ Align enrollment and student success initiatives with Tribal priorities and community aspirations. ▸ Ensure SEM strategies reflect and reinforce Tribal identity and relationships.	▸ Enhanced cultural relevance of institutional policies and practices. ▸ Stronger alignment between institutional goals and community priorities. ▸ Greater student belonging, engagement, and persistence. ▸ Preservation and strengthening of Indigenous knowledge, languages, and values.
Visibility and Redistribution	▸ Transparency ▸ Storytelling; community engagement ▸ Representation	▸ Publicly communicate SEM goals, activities, and outcomes through various outlets like websites and media. ▸ Ample storytelling uses data and student success narratives to demonstrate institutional impact. ▸ Engage Tribal communities, governing boards, policymakers, and external partners through transparent reporting. ▸ Participate in regional and national higher education forums to elevate Indigenous education impact and success stories.	▸ Increased visibility of TCU contributions and student outcomes. ▸ Strengthened stakeholder trust and support. ▸ Enhanced advocacy opportunities and resource development. ▸ Greater representation of Indigenous perspectives in higher education discourse.
Strategic Planning and Regenerative Impact	▸ Capacity building ▸ Sustainability institutionalization ▸ Long-term intergenerational change	▸ Establish and sustain SEM-related positions, including enrollment managers, institutional research professionals, career and transfer specialists, and Tribal and community liaisons. ▸ Integrate SEM into ongoing institutional planning and decision-making processes. ▸ Leverage partnerships for programming, technical assistance, and capacity-building networks to support implementation. ▸ Treat SEM planning as a continuous, adaptive, and generational process.	▸ Increased organizational capacity for enrollment and student success initiatives. ▸ Sustainable SEM infrastructure and staffing models. ▸ Long-term institutional effectiveness. ▸ Regenerative impacts that benefit future generations of students and Tribal communities.

[1] The CNSS Theory of Action Framework uses the 4R's (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1991; Wilson 2008) and the Native Nation Building principles (Jorgensen 2007) to conceptualize and guide the praxis of Indigenous-rooted SEM.

flecting traditional SEM practices, TCUs incorporate their dual missions by designing SEM strategies that embed Indigenous pedagogies, cultural revitalization, and community engagement.

Visibility, Storytelling, and Data Sovereignty. Visibility is an essential aspect of SEM. Some institutions maintain transparency by sharing SEM progress and data trends through public-facing platforms. At

TCUs, storytelling, an Indigenous knowledge-sharing practice, is a mechanism for reporting student success and strengthening relationships with tribal communities (Santos and Tachine 2024; Wilson 2008). This tradition is often integrated by TCUs when they share their enrollment trends and strategies through kinship, where students are celebrated, connected and seen. Increased TCU participation in national higher education events also enhances visibility and promotes the inclusion of Native student perspectives and experiences in broader SEM discourse, since the percentage of AIAN students in higher education is so small that oftentimes these students are not recognized in the data (Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman 2023).

- **Strategic Planning, Capacity Building, and Regenerative Impact.** SEM at TCUs is a generational, regenerative process emphasizing sustainability, community benefit, and institutional capacity. At TCUs, key positions such as institutional research staff and community liaisons support long-term SEM implementation and strengthen institutional resilience. These roles ensure that SEM planning becomes embedded within institutional structures rather than dependent on short-term grants or external funding cycles. TCUs are uniquely positioned to support Native students' aspirations for cultural revitalization and Tribal nation building, reinforcing the need for sustained SEM planning (Lopez 2022).

CNSS Theory of Action, In Action: Practical Applications of Strategic Enrollment Management in Tribal Colleges and Small Community Colleges

TCU SEM Committees

TCU SEM committees are increasingly becoming spaces where institutional strategy and cultural responsibility intersect in meaningful ways that reflect the four aspects of the CNSS Theory of Action and Indigenous-rooted SEM framework. These committees are structured to center the TCU student experience, recognizing that enrollment, retention, and completion are grounded in the lived realities of Native students. TCUs reinforce their dual missions by promoting academic success and cultural continuity. This commitment is reflected in TCU SEM committees composed of more than student affairs staff to include faculty, institutional research, Elders and community members. They promote community engagement to ensure decisions are holistic, inclusive, and aligned with Indigenous values; and similarly to how they support their students in cultural activities to promote belongingness, SEM committees engage in cultural practices during their meetings too. This structure guides their leadership and accountability to the student experience, grounded in the CNSS theory of action to advance strategic institutional goals.

Their work, aligned with institutional priority areas, ensures that conversations translate into measurable action through unique key enrollment indicators (KEIs) developed to measure progress of their respective priorities—centered on cultural practices and values that reflect their data sovereignty and data governance. In Indigenous contexts, this concept is best articulated by Maggie Walter and Tahu Kukutai (2016) who define Indigenous data sovereignty as the authority of Indigenous peoples to govern data about their communities in ways that reflect Indigenous values, priorities, and self-determination. And while data governance refers to the structures and practices that determine how data are managed, accessed, and used, scholars like Stephanie Russo Carroll (2019), Desi Rodriguez-Lonebear (2016) and Jameson D. Lopez (2022) emphasize that it also must include frameworks rooted in Tribal sovereignty, cultural protocols, and community accountability to ensure accurate representation and alignment with community-defined success measures. This differs from mainstream colleges, which often only rely on state-mandated reporting metrics that may not reflect cultural priorities.

SEM Sub-committees—Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College

At Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College (KBOCC), in L'Anse, MI, SEM is a culturally grounded, communi-

ty-driven practice rather than a purely administrative function. The SEM committee, known as the Student Success Council, operates through a network of sub-committee workgroups that distribute leadership, responsibility, and accountability across the institution. Each sub-committee workgroup with representation from across the campus, has a central role in advancing Native student success by designing and implementing strategies rooted in holistic support systems that reflect Indigenous values, and ensure that decisions reflect diverse perspectives. This commitment to cultural representation is evident in the integration of Tribal Elder voices, visibility of the Ojibwe language across campus spaces, dedicated Cultural Advisor, and embedded cultural frameworks into SEM planning. Notably, KBOCC is exploring the process of canoe lodge building as a guiding metaphor for its SEM plan, an approach that reflects collective effort, intergenerational knowledge, and purposeful navigation construction and grounding, aligning institutional strategy with cultural teachings and community identity.

External Campus and Microsite Committee Members—Diné College

Similarly, Diné College demonstrates how SEM can be both expansive and culturally anchored across their two campuses, three centers, and two microsites. Established in 1968 as the first tribally controlled college in the United States, Diné College serves a wide network of campuses and microsites across Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Recognizing that location can create fragmentation, a key SEM priority is fostering cohesion and strengthening relationships across all sites to build a unified sense of community and belonging. The SEM committee reflects this commitment through inclusive representation, bringing together leadership from external campuses, microsite managers, and key departments such as institutional reporting and planning, marketing, recruitment, and student affairs. Committee members embody and represent the lived experiences and cultural perspectives of Diné (Navajo), Apache, and Hopi communities. Their work is grounded in the Diné educational philosophy—Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón (SNBH) or "one's journey of striving to live a long and harmonious life" (Cajete 2014). This philosophy and cultural value serves as both a guiding framework for SEM in how student success is defined, and institutional decisions are made, ensuring that SEM is not only strategic, but deeply aligned with cultural continuity, balance, and relational accountability.

SEM Retention Strategies

TCUs understand their students' needs; they are relatives through kinship—incorporating different strategies to assist their students and impact retention. Some encourage participation in co-curricular cultural events and contextualized culturally grounded curriculum in first year experience courses. Others created food pantries through partnerships with local grocery stores and food banks to address food insecurity.

Culturally Grounded Curriculum and Co-Curricular Events—Aaniiih Nakoda College

At Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC), in Fort Belknap, Montana, the core of their mission—"to maintain and revitalize the Indigenous lifeways" guides their common understanding that when students have knowledge of their traditional values, lifeways, and language, and a sense of cultural identity and belonging, they are more likely to succeed (Friskics 2025). They found that students who participated in co-curricular cultural events were five times more likely to return the following year, or graduate, a 73 percent retention rate, compared to a 14 percent retention rate for those who did not. This indicator of success was paired with a culturally grounded curriculum. ANC requires students to take "cultural gateway courses" that include a Native language course and Introduction to American Indian Studies and strongly encourages students to take these courses in their first year.

> *You could go into any environment in the college and see how Aaniiih and Nakoda values are championed and what impact that has on the culture and mental health over at the college.*
>
> —ANC STUDENT

Culturally rooted approaches like ANC's align with Native student goals of contributing to Tribal nation building, where Indigenous students are motivated not only by personal advancement but by the desire to strengthen their communities, which SEM at TCUs intentionally supports (Lopez 2022; Youngbull and Sanders 2024).

Emergency Funding And Food Pantries—Navajo Technical University

TCUs understand their students' needs; they are relatives through kinship. Some TCUs incorporate different strategies to assist their students by creating food pantries—partnerships with local grocery stores and food banks to address food insecurity. Through CNSS, TCUs recognized the correlation between food insecurity and students' academic success as well as their motivation to enroll in the next semester. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government established the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) through the CARES Act. Tribal Colleges and Universities used HEERF funding for direct emergency aid to support student retention (Perez 2025). Perez found that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and TCUs allocated substantial amounts of emergency aid to their students as most often these populations have higher needs (Perez 2025). HEERF funding played a vital role in supporting Native student success. Once funding was no longer available, TCUs found that sustaining emergency aid programs was vital to student persistence and retention. To sustain efforts, some TCUs, like Navajo Technical University (NTU) include emergency aid and resources like food pantries in their strategic enrollment management plans, investing in their emergency aid programs on campus and collecting data from these efforts to support student persistence and retention.

The Navajo Nation spans the size of West Virginia with over 300,000 residents and only thirteen grocery stores serving the entire nation. Navajo Technical University (NTU) in Crownpoint, NM, located in the northwest corner of New Mexico, serves over 1,400 students. To address this issue, NTU instituted Peer Navigators as "resource hubs," positions held by students, to provide support and connect other students to resources they may not have known existed. Peer Navigators also assist students seeking out public assistance like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits or Medicaid. In addition to providing resources, in Spring 2025, two Peer Navigators saw the need to address food insecurity on their campus and community. They worked with a local food pantry that provided their institution with produce once a month and created their own food pantry called the "Skyhawk Nest" (Jones 2025; Sherlock 2021). NTU started collecting student data on this new resource to measure the impact it had on student retention and persistence.

Early findings show that students entering fall 2025 who accessed the pantry had higher retention rates, at 85 percent, compared to non-users, at 70 percent. Pantry users had fewer withdrawals and incomplete grades and achieved higher course completion rates with 82 percent completing the summer 2025 term and 86 percent completing fall courses. Furthermore, students who utilized the pantry were more likely to maintain full-time enrollment across terms, suggesting that access to basic needs support helps stabilize students and sustain academic momentum. The findings highlight the Skyhawk Nest as a critical component of NTU's student success infrastructure, reinforcing the importance of continued investment, strengthened partnerships, and integration with broader student support services to expand its impact.

A Contribution to Evolving SEM Literature

Indigenous experience is reshaping and redefining the original SEM framework in higher education. The Indigenous-rooted work of TCUs is what they are founded on, but their holistic, student-centered enrollment management practices have not yet been documented in SEM literature. That absence is telling at a moment when the field is taking stock of its first 50 years: the story of enrollment management has been told largely through the mainstream institutions that dominated its early literature, leaving the contributions of Tribal Colleges and minority-serving institutions at the mar-

gins of a history they helped shape. TCUs offer a transformative model of SEM grounded in a collaborative approach valuing cultural identity, reciprocity, visibility, and regenerative community impact. The Cultivating Native Student Success Theory of Action reinforces a holistic, integrated approach to SEM that differs significantly from traditional models by first centering student cultural identity and belonging to increase and sustain enrollment, retention, persistence and completion. Out of 28 TCUs involved in the CNSS initiative, 24 either maintained or experienced an increase in their enrollment from fall 2024 and 2025. Further analysis will look into what factors specifically contribute to this notable figure for TCUs and AIAN students in higher education. As SEM scholarship continues to expand, TCUs provide essential guidance on how enrollment management can support student belongingness and persistence by honoring cultural values, strengthening community wellbeing, and fostering long-term institutional transformation.

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