

## Workforce Development through Internships: Lessons from the Nez Perce Tribe

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### **Introduction**

The Nez Perce tribe is one of the five federally recognized tribes located in Idaho. They call themselves the Nimiipuu people meaning “The People”. The tribe originally had about 17 million acres considered as its homeland. In the Treaty of 1855, the Nez Perce tribe ceded 7.5 million acres to the U.S. government. The tribe would still be allowed to practice traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering activities outside tribal borders. The Treaty of 1863 further cut tribal borders by 90 percent. Today, the Nez Perce tribe includes 3,500 citizens on about 770,000 acres. About 13 percent of the land is owned by the tribe or tribal members. Within the reservation, the per capita income is around \$15,000-\$20,000. For people 25 years and older living within the reservation, about 15 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Around 40 percent have an associate degree.

For this project, American University researchers interviewed nine members of the Nez Perce as well as several others affiliated with the Nez Perce internship offerings in some way (see Appendix A for complete list of interviewees) to examine the processes and outcomes of internship programs offered by tribal departments and programs. Key factors, such as funding and cultural traditions, that have impacted tribal internship goals are assessed. This study is intended for use by other tribes, local governments and other organizations to learn from the Nez Perce programs to advance their own workforce development goals.

### **Internship Features**

The Nez Perce have a long tradition of providing internship opportunities for students across tribal departments. The fisheries department covers three states- Idaho, Oregon, and Washington- and has about 200 employees with 51 percent of them tribal members. As stated in the Treaty of 1855, the Nez Perce tribe is expected to protect and restore watersheds within its historic territory. The tribe is responsible for more watershed restoration projects than any other entity in the Snake River basin. In 2018, the tribe released about a third of the basin’s total fish population. Along with the Snake River Basin, the tribe also manages the Columbia, Tucannon, Grande Ronde, Imnaha, Clearwater, and Salmon drainages.

In addition to fisheries, the tribe’s natural resources department has six divisions--Cultural Resources, Environmental Restoration & Waste Management (ERWM), Land Services, Forestry

& Fire Management, Water Resources, and the Wildlife Division. These divisions offer internships for both high school and college students. The goal of the internships is to introduce native students to STEM fields while incorporating traditional values. The tribe uses internships to open doors for members to explore and gain knowledge in various fields.

Internships are decentralized with each division managing its own on-boarding, training, supervision and mentoring. However, the human resources department posts internship opportunities on the tribe's website and handles payroll for interns. Some similarities across divisions' internship practices include:

- *Recruiting:* All departments rely on word of mouth when it comes to recruiting interns. Division managers generally have connections with faculty at Northwest Indian College, the University of Idaho, and Lewis-Clark State College, who help promote internship opportunities to students in relevant areas of study. Cultural Resources and ERWM hold an orientation event at which they explain to prospective interns the opportunities available to them through their internships. The source of internship funding determines whether divisions must hire non-tribal members or whether they can limit hiring to tribal members. All of those interviewed for this research indicated that they look beyond GPAs and focus on a range of factors such as effort and initiative, how the tribal member has interacted within the tribe, and level of family financial or other needs.
- *Building Interest:* In fisheries and cultural resources, after selecting interns, the managers talk to them to understand their interests and goals to help determine which projects would be the best fit for each individual intern. Funding can limit the number and type of projects a department has for internships. This makes it a challenge for departments such as Air Quality to design an internship that best fits an intern's needs and interests. Air Quality is trying to incorporate internships that are centered on wood burning practices and other tribal practices to build that connection and interest for interns. Cultural Resources rotates interns on various projects to allow them to explore different interests. Every department seeks to keep interns engaged in meaningful work.
- *Reporting:* Each department requires interns to report on their progress and skills learned. The fisheries department requires interns to update a notebook weekly on things they have learned. ERWM requires a monthly report from interns. This allows mentors and directors to track the interns' progress. The reports are later used to develop end of project presentations and scholarship opportunities.
- *Pay:* All internships are paid following the tribe's classification system. However, the amount and consistency of funding depends on the specific internship funding source, which mostly includes federal and state agencies. Most of the internships require about 30 hours a week during the summer except for ERWM which offers a year-round internship program. Because of the tribe's fisheries history, fisheries interns receive an

income tax exemption on their salary resulting in greater take-home pay, adding to the popularity of this internship placement.

- *Maintaining a Connection:* Departments stay connected with interns that show high interest in their projects. ERWM and Air Quality departments use their connections to help interns gain full time positions in both tribal and federal government positions. The fisheries department will typically provide full-time, permanent positions to fisheries interns.
- *Funding:* Other than fisheries, tribal departments lack a dedicated internship funding stream. The fisheries department has about a \$20 million annual budget underwritten by both the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the tribal hatchery programs. The sale of fishing and hunting licenses provides another stream of income for internships. The department is also eligible for grants through the FWS and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Other departments do not have access to multiple streams of funding and generally rely on a single external funding source. ERWM relies on funds from the Department of Energy while Cultural Resources depends on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) funding. Because funding is often not consistent year to year, departments end up hiring interns on a project-by-project basis.

### **Success Factors**

Interviewees attributed the success of internship programs to three main factors.

1. *Incorporating Traditional Values:* The Nez Perce tribe has a fishing tradition, and internships offered within the fisheries department are the most popular among young people. Depending on funding, they have about 10-12 interns annually, while other departments average four interns per year. Students applying for fisheries internships tend to already be experienced fisherman. They are familiar with much that is required of the position and eager to both learn more and to pursue careers in this field. Air Quality has seen growing interest as they incorporate research on the effects of distinct types of wood and practices used in sweating. In addition, COVID-19 and the rise in frequency and intensity of wildfires have made tribal members more interested in air quality issues and how they impact their day to day lives. Interns in the Cultural Resources department can face extreme heat and forest fires while doing field work. These types of working conditions, along with the lack of familiarity among young tribal members of the work, result in fewer internship applicants in this department. Tying the internship positions to something interns can identify with and that they value is particularly important.
2. *Maintaining a Support System:* The tribe values support for interns throughout the entire length of the program, and in some cases even after the internship period has ended. Each department matches interns with a mentor. The mentors can be past interns or people who have interacted with the tribe through other educational programs. Some departments set up networking opportunities for interns. ERWM flew

the interns to conferences such as the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) National Conference. This system of support helps interns look up to someone and guide them throughout the internship and into their future professions.

3. *Inspiring Students at a Young Age*: The ERWM program has an elementary and middle school STEM educational program. The elementary program, Environmental Education and Cultural Knowledge Day, is a one-day program targeted towards elementary students. It has 8 to 14 vendors ranging from local tribal programs to the EPA. The goal is to inspire interest in STEM among young students. The middle school program, PACE, has a similar goal. PACE is a two-week program. It is competitive with 20 spots and open to both tribal and non-tribal member students. At the end of the program, students are given a \$300 stipend. The main goal of PACE is to teach math and science skills to students to help them transition to high school. Many of the students who participate in these programs become mentors for interns. Cultural Resources and ERWM attend job fairs to educate prospective interns about the range of possibilities for them in the professional field. The goal is to expose students to new topics and potential areas of interest.

## **Challenges**

Tribal departments face difficulties in implementing internship programs which are summarized below.

1. *Maintaining Funding*: Tribal departments have long faced challenges with internship program funding and COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges. Instead of having a consistent number of interns each year, departments are limited to hiring interns based on project funds available. Some years, departments do not have the funds to hire any interns. ERWM had a large internship program primarily funded by the US Department of Energy, but now only has a couple of interns annually. As previously indicated, the fisheries department has the most consistent funding. Revenues from gaming funds are not applicable to education or internships beyond an annual \$10,000 allocation, which is currently not applied to funding interns. Adding the annual \$10,000 towards internships could go a long way towards growing the program and strengthening the workforce pipeline.
2. *Decentralized Management and Mentorship*: As previously indicated, each department manages its own interns without any centralized coordination across departments, other than the intern hiring and payroll functions. Because of this, supervision of interns is time intensive and laborious for department managers who are not paid to assume these responsibilities. Creating a central “tribal government 101” course or experience, career readiness training and mentorship opportunities, and making them available to interns in all departments could help reduce this burden and could managers to devote time to bringing on additional interns or spending less time away from their primary

duties. Further, centralizing some of these core internship activities could have the added benefit of create a cohort of interns who grow together as an informal network. The Education department, for example, might develop and deploy these offerings.

3. *Educational Opportunity Mismatch: Local colleges do not meet all the educational needs of tribal interns.* For example, the Northwest Indian College located in Lapwai, ID, does not offer archeology studies which would be beneficial for those who wish to grow their career within the Cultural Resources department. For students that leave the reservation to attend university, it can be a challenge to thrive without the support of their community. They often feel disconnected and not supported even though the large universities in the region work to provide the support needed by tribal youth. Because of this challenge, young people often feel as though they do not have many professional opportunities outside of what is offered by the tribal government.
4. *Limited Growth Within the Tribal Workforce:* Once an intern successfully completes an internship, there is limited room for them to grow within the tribe. Tribal youth have trouble envisioning themselves in tribal leadership positions that have been predominantly male dominated and, in some cases, held by members of certain families for years. In many cases, qualified interns begin their careers in the tribal government and then end up leaving the reservation to work for governmental agencies or contractors once they have some experience. Building processes and support for interns to successfully advance professionally within the tribe over the long term would go a long way towards filling difficult to fill positions.

### **Lessons Learned**

Securing reliable funding is one of the first steps tribes and minority groups should take when starting internship programs. A designated person or team that organizes the processes of identifying and pursuing grants will help maximize funding for internship programs. For tribal groups, it is important to note that some funders will only fund federally recognized tribes as opposed to state recognized tribes. Creating a reserve fund from gaming or licensing proceeds is one strategy that would facilitate a dedicated funding stream for internships.

Molding the project to fit the needs of the intern and tying it to traditional practices increases the likelihood of the intern staying involved beyond the duration of the internship. This can be challenging but putting in the effort to make a connection between western and traditional tribal ways will allow the intern to feel supported. Managers must be flexible to meet the needs of the intern.

Thinking beyond the internship and where students may eventually work will allow students to gain support and knowledge they will need for their careers. It is vital to give the tools and support needed to successfully carry out the internship, but it is equally important to make sure interns feel they have room to grow within the workforce. Making sure that the interns can be hired within the community and are given opportunities to advance to senior positions will provide them with examples to which they can relate as well as inspiration.

### **Conclusion**

The tribal internship programs provide young people with valuable on-the-job and career readiness experiences and the possibility for future STEM and environmental careers. The tribe has invested in young people, in many cases, from a very young age. The decentralized nature of tribal internships means the supervision and management of each intern is very labor intensive for department managers. Creating a centralized function that would bring interns from different departments together for general courses and training would benefit both the interns and the host departments. Hiring based on only academic success (i.e., GPA) or other quantitative measure limits opportunities for many young people who may not have been successful in school but who have different strengths. Similarly, valuing traditional knowledge and creating an intern support system is key to assuring success for youth entering STEM fields. Burdens such as lack of reliable funding create barriers and limit opportunities for young people.

## Appendix A

### List of Interviewees

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Organization</b>
<b>Jack Bell</b>	ERWM Program Director	Nez Perce Tribe
<b>Johna Boulafentis</b>	Environmental Outreach Specialist	Nez Perce Tribe
<b>Mike Bisbee</b>	Fisheries Internship Director	Nez Perce Tribe
<b>Marcie Carter (Tribal Member)</b>	Watershed Project Coordinator	Nez Perce Tribe
<b>Ken Clark</b>	Water Resources Director	Nez Perce Tribe
<b>Ciarra Greene (Tribal Member)</b>	Native Environmental Science Faculty	Northwest Indian College
<b>Solo Greene (Tribal Member)</b>	ERWM Internship Manager	Nez Perce Tribe
<b>Jennifer Hill</b>	Native Youth Climate Adaptation Leadership Congress Coordinator	United States Fish and Wildlife Services
<b>Aaron Miles (Tribal Member)</b>	Natural Resources Director	Nez Perce Tribe
<b>Mansel Nelson</b>	Senior Program Coordinator	Tribal Environmental Education Outreach Program, Northern Arizona University
<b>Kay Seven (Tribal Member)</b>	Career Center Director	Nez Perce Tribe
<b>Nakia Williamson-Cloud (Tribal Member)</b>	Cultural Resource Program Director	Nez Perce Tribe