

# Data Can Support Tribal Sovereignty

Any community's ability to understand, govern, and advocate for itself is deeply tied to having access to data about itself.

But current federal, state, and institutional data systems are not designed or used to support Tribal Nation sovereignty—the right of Tribal Nations and their citizens to self-govern and maintain a Nation-to-Nation relationship with the US federal government. The data that institutions and governments collect from the 574 federally recognized Native American Nations in the United States is often inconsistent, incomplete, divorced from Tribal priorities, and mistrusted.

To ensure that institutional, state, and federal data support Tribal sovereignty, policymakers at all levels must:

- Collaborate with Tribal Nations to collect data that represents Native American communities;
- Develop tools to provide Tribal Nations with meaningful access to data about their communities; and
- Provide support for Tribal governments to answer and contextualize their own questions.



## Collaborate with Tribal Nations to collect data that represents Native American communities.

Indigenous data sovereignty requires that policy leaders work with Tribal Nations on the development, collection, analysis, and dissemination of data. In addition to building respect for and trust in data, collaboration that incorporates Tribal perspectives can actually yield more accurate, complete, and useful data by adopting practices including:

- **Disaggregating data on individual Tribal communities** and grouping smaller Tribal Nations together where needed to increase sample size. Native American communities are not a monolith, but datasets rarely include information on Tribal affiliation. Allowing individuals to identify their primary and secondary Tribal affiliations along with other racial identities will ensure that datasets both capture Tribal communities and reflect the complexities and differing experiences of these communities.

### Data Beyond Tribal Affiliation

Tribal affiliation, while deeply important, captures only part of Native American identities. In addition to including data on Tribal affiliation, some datasets could include more nuanced measures of cultural identity to make the data more representative of Native American experiences and therefore more useful. For example, where appropriate, data collections could ask respondents to reflect on their experiences with their Indigeneity such as whether they have knowledge of their Tribe's language, participate in Tribal ceremonies (e.g., sunrise, Sundance, cremation, sweat), or have close relationships with Tribal relatives.

- **Integrating Indigenous data collection practices.**

Indigenous data practices allow researchers and Tribes to select culturally responsive data activities. These practices could include framing data collections through Indigenous knowledge, such as creation stories, to improve survey response rates and create datasets that support the types of policy questions that are most relevant to Tribal governments. Researchers have outlined steps to undertaking a culturally responsive data collection including following individual Tribal Nations' elder engagement processes and selecting culturally appropriate data collection methods.

## Rethinking Data Through Creation Stories

Integrating Indigenous data practices into existing data collections can realign assumptions about values and education outcomes. For many Tribes, creation stories reinforce principles of harmony and respect; provide perspective on plants, animals, and other people; and help explain life cycles, death, and mourning. Data elements and collection processes can pull from these foundational stories to yield more relevant data that reflects Tribes' worldviews and supports their sovereignty by enabling them to frame education and workforce conversations according to their own values. Neighboring Tribal Nations or Nations that share common geographical features such as rivers often share similar creation stories, allowing for more aligned data collection across those communities.



## Develop tools to provide Tribal Nations with meaningful access to data about their communities.

Data access to support Tribal sovereignty requires much more than disseminating a report or spreadsheet. Meaningful access means allowing Tribal communities to interact with their own data. Policymakers can support this access in several ways including:

- **Creating interactive tools and dashboards** (like the Census Bureau's Demographic Data Map Viewer) that allow Tribes to explore the data on their communities;
- **Building data portals or networks** to provide Tribes with secure, role-based access to raw data files on their communities; and

- **Prioritizing Native researcher access to data** to support Tribal Nations' ability to discover and share their own findings and narratives. Existing structures, like the Institutional Review Board housed by Northwest Indian College, can help ensure that Tribes have more streamlined access to data about their own communities. Researchers frequently overlook datasets like the National Indian Education Study because of its burdensome access request process.

## Building Research Capacity: The National Native Scholarship Providers (NNSP)

The NNSP consists of four scholarship organizations—Cobell Scholarship Program, American Indian College Fund, American Indian Science and Engineering Society, and Native Forward—that work collaboratively to amplify the voices of Indigenous students through data. Their collaboration has created a more robust picture of Indigenous students' experience and has resulted in Indigenous-centric data sharing, collection, analysis, and reporting and data sharing agreements.



## Provide support for Tribal governments to answer and contextualize their own questions.

In addition to being able to access data about their communities, Tribal governments need to be able to frame and analyze that data in alignment with their own cultural priorities and lenses. For example, many Tribes may ground their questions about education outcomes in community values. Rather than asking about the average outcomes of students, Tribes may wish to explore questions like:

- What is the impact of student success and economic mobility on Tribal traditions?
- Do reading and math standards influence how students give back to Tribal communities?
- How does college degree attainment support the protection of water and land rights?

When Tribal governments can create their own framing, they are able to develop and answer their own priority questions and plan for the education and workforce journeys of their citizens.

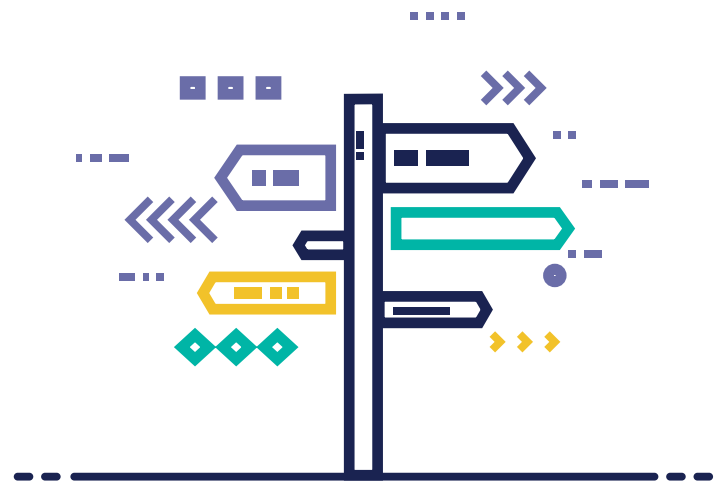
### Leading States

Some states are already starting to provide Tribal Nations with robust, contextualized data on their communities. [Montana](#) and [Arizona](#) produce reports on Native American K–12 education that include information on school density, Tribal affiliations, and geographic information that’s useful for ecological considerations.

## Conclusion

Data can be a powerful tool for supporting Tribal Nations in their right to sovereignty and self-governance. The citizens of Tribes and Tribal Nations must be included in designing data collections and must have subsequent access to robust, accurate, contextualized, and timely data.

While this brief reflects the unique needs, culture, and historical dynamics of Tribes and Tribal Nations, many of these ideas around collaboration and access may be useful in other conversations about how different communities can be empowered with their own data and stories.



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### ABOUT THE DATA QUALITY CAMPAIGN

The Data Quality Campaign is a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization leading the effort to ensure that data works for everyone navigating their education and workforce journeys. For more information, go to [dataqualitycampaign.org](https://dataqualitycampaign.org) and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).