

# HELPING YOUTH **THRIVE**

*HELPING YOUTH THRIVE THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS*



**PLWG**  
PROGRAM LEADERS  
WORKING GROUP



FACT SHEET  
**12/12**

*4-H Program Leaders Working Group*  
***Access, Equity and Belonging Committee***

## **American Indian/Alaskan Native (First Nations) Youth**

*April 2022*

# Why an Equity Lens?

4-H has made a bold commitment to youth across the United States: to reflect the population demographics, vulnerable populations, diverse needs, and social conditions of the country (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). 4-H has affirmed that we will help close the opportunity gap for marginalized youth and communities to fully thrive (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 4-H, 2019; National 4-H Council, 2020). Making good on these promises requires that all those working with youth in 4-H critically analyze current programs and deliver those programs through an equity lens. Administrators, professionals, volunteers, and stakeholders have a responsibility to be aware of and confront the disparities that exist within 4-H programs and in society. Doing so is critical because those who aim to develop youth without acknowledgment of and response to a young person's possible societal inequities is perpetuating injustice (Fields et al., 2018). The 4-H Thriving Model (Arnold, 2018) describes the process of positive youth development in 4-H. We should explore the 4-H Thriving Model, our national theoretical framework, with the same level of critical review to ensure it guides our work with equity and social justice at the fore.

The 4-H Program Leaders Working Group, Access, Equity, and Belonging Committee (AEBC) has joined with the 4-H Thriving Model Taskforce to ensure this nationally adopted model is explored and utilized through an equity lens. The following fact sheet explores the Thriving Model in relation to American Indian and Alaska Native Youth.

Extension professionals serve a diversity of First Nations, with each community having distinct characteristics. Cultural factors can significantly impact a program's relevance, and subsequent positive outcomes in such communities. The diversity of cultures within American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) communities requires an Extension professional first to familiarize themselves with the unique culture, social ecosystem, and sacred history of the tribe they plan to work with in order to ensure a level of success. Whenever possible, specific tribal names should be used (AEBC, 2020). However, when speaking in general terms, Yellow Bird (1999) argues the diversity of culture and history in AI/AN groups is best described through the nomenclatures of "Indigenous Peoples," or "First Nations People." The term "First Nations" accurately promotes recognition of inclusiveness, sovereignty, and identity empowerment sought by Indigenous peoples of North America (Yellow Bird, 1999). In this document as a whole we have used many terms that are in common usage, however best practice is to understand the community that you are working with, and the terminology that is considered positive in that context.

An equity lens will allow an Extension practitioner to understand the specific conditions they must consider when planning to program with Indigenous communities. Examples of a few such conditions are below.

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## Social Conditions of Youth Population

AI/AN youth face many-layered, multi-faceted conditions that affect their development and their participation in activities. Many organizations and institutions within the United States, including state and federal governments, follow 'majority' cultural expectations largely established through a lineage of colonialism. As a result, many Indigenous peoples are required to participate in social settings that require assimilation for success, i.e., the metrics of success are those of the colonizer. Identity recognition and empowerment is a means of asserting tribal sovereignty and mitigating these firmly established historical inequities. Specific themes that might be helpful here are described below.

### **Positive Social Condition**

Native communities, especially reservation communities, are close-knit. Native communities have operated as a collective society since time immemorial (beginning of time) and this is true to this day. Though people know each other, bonding social capital is high, and social capital networks are essential. This leads to cohesion and norms of cooperation. Inherently cohesive communities provide a sense of belonging and encourage a common vision

and a shared future (ICOCO Foundation, 2021). Keep in mind that each community will vary in how they express identity, view privacy, and interact socially. These bullets should not be considered universal, but as possibilities to build a respectful approach to unique individuals and communities.

- The collectivist culture found in many tribal communities is conducive to working towards common goals and shared visions.
- Positive role models in Indian Country are both historical and contemporary and represent people who exemplify what it means to be “Indian”.
- The Peoplehood Model (Holm et al., 2003) provides insight into AI/AN culture, emphasizing the importance of cultural histories, places, ceremonies and languages. The Peoplehood Model refers to shared backgrounds, histories and common experiences which individuals and groups can reference. There is a developing Extension practice and literature incorporating these themes of identities into PYD (Farella, et al., 2021; Farella, et al., 2021).
- Ancestral territories and meaningful places are the landscapes and places that provide a canvas for the Indigenous experience. Indigenous groups have millennia of experience in these landscapes and places or locations become a defining factor of identity.
- Central to many tribal communities are ceremonial cycles and traditional calendars. Ceremonies and events occur seasonally and create a foundational understanding of identity and time for many Indigenous peoples. 4-H educators should be aware of these events/calendars as they are essential to much of Indigenous identity and social cohesiveness.
- Language provides insight into a culture’s world perception and is a mechanism for cultural capital and pride. Many tribal schools include Indigenous, tribe-specific language in their curriculum.
- Tribal colleges help transition youth from high school to college. Most tribal colleges offer associate degrees and some offer bachelor’s degrees. Because of their ability to apply for grants as part of their 1994 Land Grant designation and Cooperative Extension mission, tribal colleges are potential program partners. Tribal colleges are an educational pathway to Land Grant Universities that have active Native American programs and/or support for AI/AN students.
- AI/AN have positive identities that connect to culture, language, art, and other traditions.

### **Challenging Social Conditions**

- AI/AN have the highest poverty rate in the nation. In 2019, the rate was 25.4%, higher than for any other ethnic group (Muhammad et al., 2019; Davison 2018). Some of this is due to the location of tribes in rural more isolated areas.
- The administration and/or teachers turn over quickly in Native schools. This lack of consistency is difficult for youth who need people they can depend on, (Plank, 1996; Hillbrant, 1991)
- The high school dropout rates for AI/AN youth are high due, in part, due to poor social and family conditions that require adaptive pathways to success for Native youth. Priorities may include a safe place that provides the necessities of food, a place to sleep, and healthcare, (Brown-Rice, 2013; Farella et al., 2020; 2021).
- There are high rates of violence against Native women which affect Native youth. Some of the violence is secondary to drugs, alcohol, and joblessness and some is due to inconsistencies of federal and state law around the prosecution of abusers, (Fatal Encounters, 2021; Brown-Rice, 2013) .
- AI/AN individuals are subject to prejudice and discrimination by non-Natives. This is especially prevalent in communities that are next to Indian reservations. Institutional discrimination occurs across social institutions including health care (Findling et al., 2019), law enforcement (Fatal Encounters, 2021), and political institutions (Findling et al., 2019; NPR, 2017).
- AI/AN youth tend to be geographically and economically isolated, especially if they live on their tribe’s reservation land.
- Cultural Appropriation is the use (misuse) of cultural elements of Native culture by the dominant (white) culture. Cultural appropriation can include exploitation of another culture’s religious and cultural traditions, fashion, symbols, language, and music. Having one’s culture treated as an accessory or costume devalues and dehumanizes Indigenous experience.

- The National Indian Council on Aging (2019) reports that one of six AI/AN individuals has Type 2 diabetes, which occurs due to poor nutrition, which is often due to poverty (NICOA News 2019).
- Suicide rates for AI/AN are 22.1 per 100,00 people compared to 14.1 for the general population (2019). Rates are highest among Native youth, especially males, ages 15-25 (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2021).
- Food insecurity exists, especially for urban Indians who may not have access to the same tribal resources that people living on or near their reservation communities have (Jernigan et al., 2017). Food insecurity can lead to health complications such as diabetes. 4-H professionals need to be aware of food insecurity when programming occurs. Understanding community needs should be part of the professional's capacity to connect and serve AI/AN communities.
- Loss of Native language, cultural identity and cultural-social knowledge. For example, not having a place in non-Native society. This loss impedes bridges to elders, sense of place, and knowledge of cultural history.
- There may be a lack of positive role models and inconsistent care.

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## Competencies Needed to Engage Youth Population

It is critical for youth development professionals to work towards the development of skills and knowledge that allows programs to benefit all youth. The following skills were adapted from the 2017 4-H Professional, Research, Knowledge and Competencies (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

### *Developing an Awareness*

- Exhibit self-awareness including one's cultural/social identities, assumptions, values, norms, biases, stereotypes, preferences, experience of privilege and oppression, and how they shape one's view on mental health and wellbeing.
- Recognize the validity of multiple perspectives and strive to think openly and inclusively without prejudging others.
- Increase knowledge and skills in cultural competency to be prepared to work with AI/AN youth on or off-reservation.
- Develop a deep understanding and curiosity of the cultural and political history of AI/AN nations. Cultural history is not enough. It is important to understand the implications of inconsistencies in tribal/federal government relations and how those inconsistencies affected and still affect Indian Country.
- Understand equity versus equality for Native youth. Look at specific needs, deficiencies, and efficacies to create equitable programs. Equal resources do not necessarily have equitable outcomes.
- Understand the variations among terms, for example, Native American, American Indian, and Indian Country. Know when it is appropriate to use these terms.
- Demonstrate compassion and understand how stereotypes and generalizations are harmful. Adopt a critical framework and an ethic of cultural humility, i.e., "an overt and stated cultural ignorance and a willingness and desire to be taught" (Farella, et al., 2021 p. 1, see also Foranda et al., 2016, Danso, 2018; Van Tongeren, 2019).
- Be knowledgeable about Indigenous wisdom in PYD, for example the Circle of Courage (Brendtro et al., 1991), which emphasized a sense of belonging, independence, mastery and generosity.
- Consider the effects of intergenerational trauma that may affect how someone participates in 4-H programming. For example, 4-H programming often includes overnight events, but Native parents may not feel comfortable sending their youth to overnight events.

# Belonging and Participation in 4-H

Recognize and honor the values of AI/AN cultures and incorporate these into planning and programming. The Peoplehood Model (Holm et al., 2003) provides a good framework for working with AI/AN youth. Other best practices for inspiring belonging and participation:

- Because of the collectivist nature of AI/AN communities, programming usually should occur in group settings.
- Humor is important and is part of the resilience of Native American communities.
- Develop 4-H projects around current AI/AN topics or issues, for example:
  - Tribal food sovereignty
  - Tribal entrepreneurship & Native artist entrepreneurship
  - Social justice issues important to specific tribal communities
  - Incorporating Native language(s) and dialects of the community one is working with into youth programming.
- Inclusion requires making a conscious, meaningful, and thoughtful effort to make space for AI/AN youth, culture, and values. Cultivate a positive ethnic and racial identity.
- Develop programs that fit specific communities.
- Define a successful program in terms of a specific tribe's culture, social setting, and metrics of success.
- 4-H marketing materials should reflect an equitable approach to participant diversity, i.e. promote programming in ways that are accessible to all participants as opposed to the majority. .

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## Community Relationships and Partners

Partnerships with knowledgeable individuals and groups can provide insight, legitimacy and cultural relevance to initiatives within First Nation communities. Often, there are multiple youth programs for AI/AN youth, many that compete for resources that may be scarce in small geographic locations. 4-H professionals should consider partnering with other youth organizations to deliver youth programming.

All programming and engagement with Native youth, especially those living on or near their reservation communities, must be approved by tribal councils and often from tribal cultural committees. Long waiting periods can make programming difficult, and it is important for 4-H professionals to understand that different tribes have different approval processes. Also, it is important for Extension professionals to observe community relationships and identify culture-specific leadership positions. For example:

- Elders
- Tribal Councils – governing body for the tribe(s)
- Tribal government departments and offices, e.g., natural resources, culture, language, social services, justice, health, recreation
- Tribal Colleges
- Land Grant Universities & Extension
- School districts on reservations
- Sports coaches
- Hunters and gatherers
- Native American churches
- Churches/faith-based groups
- Youth organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs
- Schools
- Tribal programs

# Evaluation

## **For: Youth, Volunteers, Staff**

- Use instruments based upon the population that is served. If possible, evaluations should incorporate Indigenous leaders and community members in developing assessments for their people.
- Language and wording should reflect common AI/AN words, themes, and thoughts.
- Instruments should be usable, easy to understand, and easy to follow. In practice, evaluators need to cultivate an understanding of their community for best results. For example, many communities of Native youth respond more readily in a group setting.
- Use Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) practices – community members, First Nation governments, and other organizations should share in the dialogue surrounding these initiatives. Community questions should have community answers.
- Know the effective evaluation methods for AI/AN populations, for example, qualitative methods such as ethnography, stories, and focus groups.
- Evaluation should determine if programs incorporate elements of the Peoplehood Model, language, history, ceremony, and place.

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