

# CONNECTING MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS AND RURAL RESEARCH

Community  
Strategies Group



## THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK

The Thrive Rural Framework is a tool to help communities take stock, target action, and gauge progress on rural prosperity. This involves understanding the community’s assets, the underlying factors that contribute to rural prosperity (and how they connect), and local and systems level drivers of change. Rural research systems and institutions are foundational for developing these understandings. This brief explores the intersections between rural research systems and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Specifically, it demonstrates the role of MSIs in rural research and the potential for MSIs to be better supported and integrated into the rural research system to forward the goals of rural and racial equity embodied in the Thrive Rural Framework.

## SUMMARY

Research institutions and networks play a foundational role in understanding and bringing awareness to rural issues. Research can help garner the support and resources needed to develop, implement, and evaluate solutions aligned with rural needs and experiences. Given the role of Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) as an entry point into the middle class for many individuals and as anchor institutions in small and rural communities, this brief explores intersections between rural research and MSIs. We provide an overview of rural-focused research systems and MSIs, with a focus on their intersections, research activity and capacity, and opportunities for integration. We show that there is both substantial research activity coming from MSIs and the Indigenous research ecosystem, but also gaps and barriers related to the availability of research support within the context of how MSIs are structured and how research is funded.

This overview aims to uncover opportunities to better integrate and leverage rural perspectives and actors within rural research. We outline several key considerations and future questions for researchers, funders, and policymakers working to advance rural equity. In particular, we highlight opportunities to advance rural research and racial equity through centering the voices of minority and rural scholars and to shift power and resources to MSIs and rural scholars to own, lead, and set research agendas that directly address issues of rural and racial equity.

Rural research systems include research institutes, centers, and networks along with research programs at higher education institutions where research on



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rural issues and populations is being conducted and disseminated. Understanding rural research systems—who is part of the research landscape, what is being researched, and how that research is being informed by rural perspectives and actors—is a critical starting place to bring rural voices and experiences to the forefront of this work. One underexplored area is how Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) fit into the rural development and research landscape.

This brief is a starting point for understanding rural research systems, the existing and potential connections with MSIs, and how these connections could be better leveraged to center rural perspectives and actors to drive change. First, we provide an overview of rural-focused research systems and the institutional overlap between these systems and MSIs. We then describe indicators of research activity and capacity for different types of MSIs as well as the Indigenous research ecosystem and discuss potential intersections with rural research. We conclude by raising key considerations and future questions to further scholarship, practice, and policy change that will advance research that centers rural and minority voices. This brief is based on desk research that has not been ground-truthed with rural scholars and practitioners and thus is intended as a starting point for discussion to inform research agendas, resource allocation, and scholarship in rural equity research.

## GLOSSARY

**Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)** is an umbrella term for a diverse set of institutions that serve as a critical college entry point for those who have been historically or structurally excluded from higher education because of their race or ethnicity. They include the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), the Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and more recently Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs).<sup>1,2,3</sup>

**Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)** are defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965 as “...any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency...” The first colleges for African Americans were established through Black churches with the support of the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen’s Bureau, the earliest being Cheyney University in Pennsylvania in 1837. The second Morrill Act of 1890 required states, especially former confederate states, to provide land-grants for institutions for Black students if admission was not allowed elsewhere. Between 1861 and 1900, more than 90 institutions were established, including Shaw University (NC), Talladega College (AL), Howard University (DC), and Hampton University (VA).<sup>4</sup>

**Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs)** are defined by the Higher Education Act of 2008. To be eligible for US Department of Education funding, they must meet three criteria: have an enrollment of at least 40 percent African American students, a minimum of 1,000 undergraduates, and at least 50 percent low-income or first-generation degree-seeking undergraduates. There are 104 PBIs in the US, most of which are two-year public community and technical colleges. They are concentrated in the South, Midwest, and East, mainly in urban areas.<sup>5</sup>

**Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)** are federally recognized two- or four-year institutions with at least 50 percent low-income students, whose enrollment comprises at least 25 percent full-time Latinx undergraduates. There are 539 HSIs in the US, which enroll 67 percent of all Latinx undergraduates between them. There are HSIs in 30 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, but most are geographically concentrated in four locations: California (175), Texas (100), Puerto Rico (64), and New York (35).<sup>6</sup>

**Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)** are colleges or universities with an undergraduate enrollment that is at least 10 percent Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander. Further, at least half of the institution’s

degree-seeking students must be low-income. AANAPISIs were established by Congress in 2007 as part of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act and expanded under the Higher Education Act of 2008. They include community colleges, regional campuses, and state flagship institutions. They are located across the US in areas with high percentages of AAPI populations, including California, Hawaii, Illinois, New York, Massachusetts, Maryland, Texas, Washington, and Guam. There are as many as 192 AANAPISIs, of which 71 are in California.<sup>3,7</sup>

**Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)** include 32 accredited colleges and universities in 12 states, mainly in the western half of the country, with approximately 30,000 students overall. All are designated 1994 land-grant institutions. With two exceptions, TCUs are chartered by their respective tribal governments and serve students from over 250 federally recognized Indian tribes. Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute in New Mexico were established and are directly funded by the federal government.<sup>8</sup>

**Indigenous Research Ecosystem** refers to the network of institutions, organizations, centers, and programs dedicated to research on Indigenous issues. This comprises national membership organizations, national research centers, and regional research centers, as well as programs at non-Tribal universities. There are 27 colleges and universities (both public and private) in 17 states that offer full programs or concentrations in Native American or Indigenous People Studies.<sup>9</sup>

**Land-Grant Institutions** are colleges and universities, at least one in every state, designated by state legislature or Congress under the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, and the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994. Research, teaching, and extension are the three pillars of the land-grant system. The original mission of the 1862 Act was to teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanic arts as well as classical studies so members of the working classes could obtain a liberal, practical education. The act provided grants in the form of federal lands to each state, and the states used the proceeds from the sale of these lands to establish a public institution to fulfill the Act’s mission. There are 57 so-called 1862 institutions located in each state, US territory, and the District of Columbia. The second Morrill Act led to the establishment of 19 HBCUs as 1890 land-grant institutions. The Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act led to the designation of 36 TCUs as 1994 institutions and the recognition of a national land-grant system, supported by a range of federal appropriations and state matching funds.<sup>10,11</sup>





## RURAL-FOCUSED RESEARCH SYSTEMS

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Research focused on rural people, places, policies, and practices is conducted at many higher education institutions across the United States. Most of these institutions are land-grant universities (see Glossary). Research is one of the three pillars of the land-grant system (the others being teaching and extension), and is conducted through the State Agricultural Experiment Stations, the Cooperative Extension Service, and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture.<sup>11</sup> Within the 1862 land-grant university system, there are several well-established federally-supported nodes and networks of research activity that focus on non-agricultural rural topics and issues. We group these into three categories: regional rural development centers, rural health research centers, and rural research clusters.

### Regional Rural Development Centers

Four centers, competitively housed at land-grant universities, are funded and coordinated through a National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) program at the US Department of Agriculture. Between them, they cover the whole country, collaborating with land-grant universities to connect research and education with communities, policymakers, and businesses:

- [\*\*North Central Regional Center for Rural Development at Purdue University\*\*](#) focuses on three thematic areas: creating resilient communities, developing leadership and civic engagement, and promoting community health and wellness. The north central region includes twelve 1862 land-grant institutions, one HBCU (1890), and 21 TCUs (1994) in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.
- [\*\*Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development at Pennsylvania State University\*\*](#) focuses on creating regional prosperity through entrepreneurial and cluster-based innovation, while balancing uses of natural resources in livable communities. The northeast region includes twelve 1862 land-grant institutions and four HBCUs (1890) in Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia.
- [\*\*Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University\*\*](#) focuses on fostering civic-minded communities, building economically vibrant communities, and strengthening capacity of communities.



The southern region includes fourteen 1862 land-grant institutions, 15 HBCUs (1890), and one TCU (1994) in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virgin Islands, and Virginia.

- [Western Rural Development Center at Utah State University](#) focuses on targeted, sustainable economic development, climate education and outreach, community development, land use management, and planning. The western region includes seventeen 1862 land-grant institutions and 13 TCUs (1994) in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the Pacific Basin.

## Rural Health Research Centers

A different system of rural-focused research at universities is coordinated and funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) at the US Department of Health and Human Services. The following are the main rural health research and analysis centers located at nine universities, three of which (Texas A&M, University of Minnesota, and University of Kentucky) are 1862 land-grant institutions.

- **Maine Rural Health Research Center** at the University of Southern Maine focuses on barriers to health access for rural residents.
- **North Carolina Rural Health Research and Policy Analysis Center** at the University of North Carolina focuses on federal insurance programs and their effect on rural populations and providers.
- **RUPRI Center for Rural Health Policy** at the University of Iowa, Department of Health Management and Policy conducts health policy research focused on the intricacies of federal programs and their impacts on rural populations.
- **Rural Health Equity Research Center** at East Tennessee State University focuses on rural substance misuse and addiction.
- **Rural & Minority Health Research Center** at the University of South Carolina focuses on health and social inequities of rural and minority populations.
- **Rural and Underserved Health Research Center** at University of Kentucky focuses on health services for rural populations.
- **Southwest Rural Health Center** at Texas A&M University focuses on special rural populations, minority populations, and health disparities.
- **University of Minnesota Rural Health Research Center** focuses on health equity.
- **WWAMI Rural Health Research Center** at University of Washington conducts policy-oriented research with an emphasis on the rural health care workforce and access to care.

## Rural Research Clusters

There are several independent state university centers and institutes, with mixed federal, state, and philanthropic funding streams, that contribute significantly to rural research. Three are located at land-grant institutions:

- **Colorado State University, Regional Economic Development Institute and Center for Environmental Justice** focuses on engaged research, rural/urban development, poverty, food systems, and nature-based economic development.
- **Oregon State University, Rural Studies Program** focuses on food security, community vitality, rural wealth creation, and rural poverty.
- **University of Missouri-Columbia** focuses on rural and regional development, food systems, and power relationships in agriculture.



Other rural research clusters include:

- **Georgia College & State University, Rural Studies Institute** focuses on participative research.
- **Ball State University in Indiana, RUPRI Center for Local and State Policy (CLASP)** focuses on rural policy recommendations and impacts, arts and community, cultural wealth, health, local and state policy, population, and place.
- **University of LaVerne in California, Center for Well-Being and Research** focuses on food systems through an equity lens. The University of LaVerne is a federally-designated Hispanic-Serving Institution.

Given the range of rural research systems and the level of overlap with land-grant institutions and MSIs, there is likely an untapped opportunity for researchers and funders to engage more intentionally with MSIs—through research partnerships, community engagement, and efforts to support and fund rural equity research. There is also an opportunity to recognize, uplift, and support the contributions of MSIs in conducting traditional and community-based research, bringing diverse perspectives and expertise to rural research, and training new generations of scholars and practitioners that can promote rural equity.

## RESEARCH AT MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

In their brief in this series, [Building Trust and Visibility Through Community-Based Participatory Research at Rural Minority-Serving Institutions](#), Gasman and colleagues note that there are over 700 MSIs in the United States which educate nearly 24 percent of all students and over 40 percent of students of color. MSIs are located throughout the nation in nearly every state—in urban, suburban, and rural areas. They educate a disproportionate percentage of students, including low-income, first-generation, and part-time students.<sup>12,13</sup>

MSIs “emerged as a response to a history of inequity and lack of minority people’s access to majority institutions... [They have] diverse faculties and staffs, provide environments that significantly enhance student learning and cultivate leadership skills, offer same-race role models, provide programs of study that challenge students, address deficiencies resulting from poor preparation in primary and secondary school, and prepare students to succeed in the workforce and in graduate and professional education.”<sup>2</sup>

As such, MSIs serve as an important middle-class entry point for many individuals and their future families. They also often serve as anchor institutions and provide crucial community services and resources, especially in rural areas. Thus, the intersection of MSIs with rural-focused research systems, and their own capacity to serve as key research institutions, are critical pieces of the rural research landscape.<sup>12,14,15,16</sup>

MSIs share many commonalities, including enrollment of a significant percentage of racial minority students, and typically focus on creating supportive environments that nurture student success through asset-based, culturally relevant, and responsive approaches.<sup>12,17,18,19</sup> However, different types of MSIs (see Glossary) are distinct in how they were formed, who they serve, and their levels of research activity and capacity. The research infrastructure of different types of MSIs is shaped by their histories, missions, and access to resources, which in turn affects their engagement in research activities and capacity to train future researchers. This section describes some of those factors in relation to different types of MSIs.

### Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) represent the longest-standing MSI designation. Today, the US Department of Education classifies 107 colleges in 23 states and territories as HBCUs. Of these, 100 are currently operational and accredited, serving a total of 327,000 students.<sup>4</sup> As noted earlier, there are 19 HBCUs designated as 1890 land-grant institutions.<sup>10</sup>





The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (CCIHE)<sup>20</sup> is considered the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in US higher education for the past four and a half decades. It classifies ten HBCUs as “doctoral universities with high research activity” (R2) with graduate programs regarded as “research doctoral.” Six of these are land-grant institutions (see Box 1).

Morgan State University’s President David Wilson has asserted that, “We should create a program of investment across the federal ‘mission’ agencies, like the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy, as well as parallel efforts at the NSF [National Science Foundation] and the National Institutes of Health that seek to elevate the first tranche of HBCUs to the highest class of research universities known as R1s. Of the 4,000-plus institutions included in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 131 are R1 doctoral universities (very high research activity) and 135 are R2 doctoral universities (high research activity). While there are 11 HBCUs classified as R2 doctoral universities — including my own national treasure, Morgan — none is an R1. Morgan is poised to be the first.”<sup>21</sup>

### Box 1:

HBCUs classified as “doctoral universities with high research activity” (R2) with graduate programs regarded as “research doctoral,” including the dominant focus of each institution—professional, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) or comprehensive—and its location type. None have a focus in humanities/social sciences.

#### Research Doctoral: Professional-dominant

- North Carolina A&T University, Greensboro, NC – midsize city, land-grant, community engaged<sup>i</sup>
- Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, FL – midsize city, land-grant
- Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX – distant town, land-grant
- Southern University/A&M College, Baton Rouge, LA – midsize city, land-grant
- Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN – large city, land-grant
- Jackson State University, Jackson, MS – midsize city
- Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD – large city

#### Research Doctoral: STEM-dominant

- University of the Eastern Shore, Princess Anne, MD – fringe town, land-grant

#### Research Doctoral: Comprehensive programs

- Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA – large city
- Howard University, Washington DC – large city

<sup>i</sup> **Carnegie Community Engagement Classification:** *Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.*



Table 1 provides some indication of resource flows into the 10 HBCUs for STEM-related activities. The highlights are:

- Eight of the ten feature in the NSF institutional profiles. Together they attracted over \$186 million in federal STEM research and development (R&D) funding, awarded 354 earned STEM doctorates, and trained 1,862 STEM graduate students.
- All ten HBCUs received NSF awards in fiscal year (FY) 2021, amounting to \$63.6 million.
- Only three of the HBCUs received awards from the federal government for social and behavioral science, amounting to just \$1.44 million.

**Table 1: National Science Funds to Ten HBCUs**

	A	B	C	D	E
HBCU	Total R&D Fed 2019 \$m	Earned Doctorates 2019	Full-Time Grad Students STEM 2019	NSF awards 2021 \$m	Fed Soc/Beh Science R&D \$m
Howard	44.2	96	432	7.6	-
Florida A&M	42.5	18	254	6.2	-
NC A&T	37.3	52	367	13.3	0.46
Jackson State	18.2	85	177	6.7	-
Tennessee State	15.2	32	207	2.5	0.48
Morgan State	13.3	37	300	9.5	-
Clark Atlanta	9.0	16	80	3.6	-
U Eastern Shore MD	7.1	18	44	7.1	0.50
Prairie View	-	-	-	5.8	-
Southern U.	-	-	-	1.3	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>186.8</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>1,861</b>	<b>63.6</b>	<b>1.44</b>

Sources:

- A-C: National Science Foundation, National Center for Science & Engineering Statistics, Academic Institution Profiles <https://ncesdata.nsf.gov/profiles/site?method=rankingbysource&ds=herd>
- D: National Science Foundation Budget Internet System Award Summaries FY 2021 <https://dellweb.bfa.nsf.gov/>
- E: Consortium of Social Science Association, College & University Ranking of Federal Social & Behavioral Science R&D 2021 <https://cossa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/RD-Rankings-2020.pdf>

## Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) have developed as a response to the substantial growth of Hispanic populations in certain geographic regions. There are 539 higher education institutions that meet the criteria for an HSI based on enrollment demographics (see Glossary). However, being designated as an HSI does not require an established commitment to educating Latinx students, and most HSIs were not founded as Hispanic-Serving Institutions. There are only three institutions that were established expressly for the purpose of educating Latinx students: Hostos Community College (established 1968), Boricua College (established 1974), both in



New York City, and National Hispanic University (established 1981), in San Jose, California. Accordingly, some scholars differentiate between Hispanic-serving and Hispanic-enrolling institutions.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly half of HSIs (237) offer graduate programs, of which 139 confer doctoral degrees.<sup>6</sup> A recent study by Martinez & Garcia<sup>22</sup> identified 11 institutions that are recognized by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as R1 doctoral universities with very high research activity (see Box 2). Further research is required to explore the extent to which HSIs serve rural Latinx students.

### Predominantly Black Institutions

Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) enroll a large population of Black and low-income students in 104 institutions across the county. PBIs cannot by law be either HBCUs or HSIs. Many PBIs were once predominantly white-serving institutions but have shifted over time in their student demographic composition. They do not have a specific mission to serve Black American students, but they do provide a gateway to higher education for low-income and first-generation Black students.<sup>5</sup> So, as with most MSIs, a PBI designation is primarily a means to secure federal funding rather than a mission-related recognition. Most PBIs are two-year public community and technical colleges and thus may not have a predominant research focus.

### Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions

Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) seek to improve and expand their capacity to serve Asian Americans and Native American Pacific Islanders and low-income individuals. They encompass a range of institutional types, including community colleges, regional campuses, and state flagship institutions. They represent less than one percent of all college and university undergraduates yet enroll 20 percent of all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. In 2021, only 32 out of almost 200 AANAPISIs received funding from the US Department of Education to, for example, provide students with support services, mentoring, leadership development, and academic achievement programming, and to provide professional development to faculty or support research relevant to the AAPI population.<sup>3,7</sup> More research is needed to understand the level of research activity and extent of focus on rural populations and/or research specific to AAPI populations that occurs through different types of AANAPISIs.

#### Box 2:

HSIs classified as R1 doctoral universities with very high research activity, including the dominant focus of each institution (STEM or comprehensive):

#### Research Doctoral: STEM-dominant

- University of California, Santa Cruz

#### Research Doctoral: Comprehensive programs

- CUNY Graduate School and University Center
- Florida International University
- The University of New Mexico, Main Campus
- The University of Texas at Arlington
- The University of Texas at El Paso
- University of California, Irvine
- University of California, Riverside
- University of California, Santa Barbara
- University of Houston
- University of Illinois at Chicago





## Tribal Colleges and Universities

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) vary in size, focus, location, and student population, but they share the mission of tribal self-determination and service to their respective communities through higher education programs that are locally and culturally based, holistic, and supportive.<sup>8</sup> TCUs are both integral and essential to their communities, creating environments that foster American Indian culture, languages, and traditions. They are often the only postsecondary institutions within some of the most under-resourced rural areas and Tribal Nations. They also serve as community resources for crucial social services and add hope to communities that suffer from high rates of poverty and unemployment.<sup>23</sup>

All TCUs are designated 1994 land-grant institutions. However, the Carnegie Classification indicates no evidence of research activities, with only five institutions offering any post-baccalaureate courses. This reflects the primary purposes of TCUs and the way they are governed and funded. An analysis published by the American Council on Education<sup>24</sup> of funding for TCUs made the following observations:

- TCUs are heavily dependent upon federal funding, primarily through the Tribal Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistant Act of 1978 (TCCUAA), which is perpetually underfunded.
- The formula for federal funding allocates money based on the enrollment of Native students and makes no allowance for non-Native students, which on average account for 15 percent of the student population, and for some TCUs is over 40 percent.
- State governments have no obligation to provide support for TCUs and, in most cases, do not. Only North Dakota and Montana provide allocation per non-Native student, and Arizona provides an annual appropriation for capital expenses and maintenance.
- TCUs are limited in their ability to raise tuition to fill revenue gaps because most of their students are low-income (75 percent are Pell Grant recipients) and do not participate in student loan programs. They are also constrained by few opportunities to access private and philanthropic sources.

Federal support comes primarily from the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) – approximately \$80 million/year – and the Department of Education – approximately \$70 million.<sup>25</sup> BIE administers funding for operating the two postsecondary institutions, grants to 29 Tribally Controlled Colleges, and support for two Tribal technical colleges (Navajo Technical University in New Mexico and United Tribes Technical College in North Dakota). BIE also funds scholarships and internships. The Department of Education provides funding for a range of uses and activities to assist TCUs to improve and expand their capacity to serve American Indian students.<sup>26</sup>





Thirty-four TCUs have received land-grant university status<sup>ii</sup> which gives them access to federal government resources through the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

The National Science Foundation provides funding to TCUs through its Tribal Colleges and Universities Programs (TCUP) to promote high-quality science and STEM education, research, and outreach; transformative capacity building; and community engagement. FY 2021 funding totaled just over \$17 million to 13 TCUs primarily for capacity building, with two-thirds going to four institutions: Diné College AZ, Sitting Bull College ND, Aaniiih Nakoda College MT, and Navajo Technical University NM.<sup>iii</sup>

## Indigenous Research Ecosystem

Tribal Colleges and Universities are mainly geared towards associate and bachelor's degree programs as well as apprenticeships, diplomas, and certificates. As such, TCUs are not the primary centers of research in Indian Country. TCU faculty and students are engaged in research, especially community-based participatory research, in collaboration with non-Tribal institutions, to enrich the student experience and connect students to mainstream education and research, especially in STEM subjects.

However, there is a significant research ecosystem focused on Indigenous issues. This includes national membership organizations, national research centers, and regional research centers, which are listed below, along with programs at non-Tribal universities. It is important to note that there has been much debate about the extractive nature of academic research and the need for effective partnerships between researchers and the communities being researched. This has led to the development of principles and strategies that should govern research and research partnerships<sup>27</sup> and to calls for reclaiming Indigenous scholarship in higher education through methodologies that honor ancestral knowledge, reframe it for the present, and discard irrelevant or harmful approaches from mainstream research.<sup>28,29</sup> An example of an initiative to assert ownership and control over research and data is the [Native BioData Consortium](#). This is a new nonprofit research institute, based on sovereign lands in South Dakota, established by Indigenous scientists and tribal members to ensure that advances in genetics and health research benefit all Indigenous people. This parallels, and perhaps responds to, another initiative from the National Institutes of Health, the [All of Us Research Program](#).<sup>iv</sup>

There are 27 colleges and universities (both public and private) in 17 states that offer full programs or concentrations in Native American or Indigenous People Studies.<sup>9</sup> The extent to which these work with or are sanctioned by Tribes is not clear, nor is the size of the enrollment. But it is an indicator of a growing interest in the history, culture, and potential of Indian Country.

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<sup>ii</sup> The USDA list of TCUs differs from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (CCIHE) list in three respects. (1) White Earth Tribal & Community College in Mahanomen, MN, designated a 1994 college, is not on the CCIHE list, but the Red Lake Nation College in Red Lake, MN, is on the CCIHE list but not on the USDA list. They are about 80 miles apart in northern Minnesota. (2) Chief Dull Knife College in Lame Deer, MT, is a 1994 college but not included on the CCIHE list. (3) Fort Berthold Community College in New Town, ND as identified in the USDA list is officially called Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College, as per CCIHE.

<sup>iii</sup> Data source: <https://dellweb.bfa.nsf.gov/>

<sup>iv</sup> The overall objective of the All of Us Research Program is to build a robust research resource to facilitate the exploration of biological, clinical, social, and environmental contributors to health and disease. The program will collect and curate health-related data and biospecimens from individuals who reflect the diversity of the United States; these data and biospecimens will then be made broadly available to the research community. In 2017, the program established a Tribal Collaborative Working Group to guide meaningful, culturally sensitive collaborations with American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. The group's [report](#) addressed topics of governance, Tribal sovereignty and consent, ethics, and partnerships.



## National Membership Organizations

- [National Congress of American Indians \(NCAI\)](#) was formed in 1944 with the mission to protect and enhance treaty and sovereign rights; secure traditional laws, cultures, and ways of life for descendants; promote a common understanding of the rightful place of tribes in the family of American governments; and improve quality of life for Native communities and peoples. The [NCAI Policy Research Center](#) focuses on research and data to support and inform the policy development efforts of tribal leaders and organizations. Its work includes analyses of Census results and voting, and briefs on a range of topics, including climate change, crime, and justice. Of interest is a November 2021 [Research Policy Update](#), *Frequently Asked Questions: Partnering with Tribal Nations on Research*.
- [American Indian Higher Education Consortium \(AIHEC\)](#) provides leadership and influences public policy on American Indian and Alaska Native higher education issues through advocacy, research, and programmatic initiatives; promotes and strengthens Indigenous languages, cultures, communities, lands, and tribal nations; and through its unique position, serves 37 established and emerging Tribal Colleges and Universities.
- [Native Research Network \(NRN\)](#) is a leadership community of American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Canadian Aboriginal persons promoting integrity and excellence in research. NRN advocates for high-quality research that is collaborative, supportive, and builds capacity. It promotes an environment for research that operates on the principles of integrity, respect, trust, ethics, cooperation, and open communication in multi-disciplinary fields. It organizes an annual Native Health Research Conference and has recently authored and edited a book on [Conducting Research in Native Communities](#).

## National Research Centers

- [Harvard Project on Indigenous Governance and Development](#) is housed within the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Through applied research and service, the Harvard Project aims to understand and foster the conditions under which sustained, self-determined social and economic development is achieved among American Indian nations. The Harvard Project's core activities include research, education, and the administration of a tribal governance awards program. At the heart of the Harvard Project is the systematic, comparative study of social and economic development on American Indian reservations—what works, where and why?
- [Native Nations Institute, University of Arizona](#) is located within the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy. It aims to provide Native nations and other policymakers with accessible research and policy analysis of governance and development in Indian Country. It also provides comprehensive, professional training and development programs designed to meet the needs of Indigenous leadership and management. It was an outgrowth of the Harvard Project and now a close partner.
- [Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health](#), within the University of Colorado-Denver School of Public Health, was established in 1986, and is the largest, most comprehensive program of its kind in the country. The Centers promote health and well-being of American Indians and Alaska Natives through research, training, continuing education, technical assistance, and information dissemination. They employ an approach that systematically considers the biological, psychological, and social factors and their interactions to understand Indigenous health.





## Regional Research Centers (select examples)

- **Center for American Indian and Rural Health Equity (CAIRHE)**, Montana State University has a mission to reduce significant health disparities in Native and rural communities through community-based participatory research (CBPR). It serves the people of Montana as a robust, interdisciplinary research center with strong engagement in communities across the state. CAIRHE also maintains a growing statewide and national network of research partners, the Health Equity Network, including clinical organizations, public health agencies, foundations, and other centers, to expand collaboration and dissemination of positive research outcomes.
- **Center for Native American Research and Collaboration**, Washington State University facilitates, promotes, and supports a vibrant and active Affiliates and Associates group comprised of tribal members, faculty, and staff that are dedicated to community-based research embedded in tribal sovereignty, values, and knowledge systems. The Center convenes these researchers to share knowledge and resources; conduct trainings to enhance skills, relationships and understandings; establish research priorities based on tribal, village, and urban Indian needs; and increase Native American graduate student involvement and training in this research.
- **Joseph A. Myers Center for Research on Native American Issues**, University of California Berkeley was founded in 2010 to provide the people of Indian Country with pragmatic research products that can be employed to improve the quality of life for Native Americans throughout the US. The Center fulfills this mission by bringing the resources of the University to Native communities; developing, coordinating, and funding collaborative, community-driven research projects; providing technical assistance and training; disseminating research publications and reports; and hosting conferences, colloquia, and other events open to the public on topics of concern to Native communities.
- **American Indian Research and Education Center (AIREC)**, University of Nevada Las Vegas conducts community-based research and promotes educational and research opportunities for American Indian/Alaska Native students. AIREC also provides training and technical assistance and serves as an informational resource for the campus community, tribal populations, and the general public.

**In this brief, we show that there is both substantial research activity coming from MSIs and the Indigenous research ecosystem, but also gaps and barriers related to the availability of research support within the context of how MSIs are structured and how research is funded.**

For instance, reliance on narrowly defined federal funding streams and lack of revenue from tuition fees, given the mission to serve low-income students and ensure the affordability of their education, results in limited funding available to build or sustain research infrastructure. More engagement of—and funding for—MSIs and Indigenous research networks within rural research systems is an essential strategy to increase rural and minority voice in research agendas, including identification of research problems, recruitment and engagement of rural research participants, interpretation and dissemination of research findings, and allocation of resources for rural research.



## KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This initial overview of rural research and intersections with MSIs raises several key considerations and future questions for researchers, funders, and policymakers working to advance rural equity. In particular, advancing rural equity requires centering the voices of minority and rural scholars. Future work can help uplift presently marginalized or missing perspectives in rural scholarship, connect and expand existing networks of rural research institutions and scholars, establish a shared research agenda, and adequately resource minority research institutions and scholars.

- **Research should further explore the shared strengths and challenges of MSIs and their roles within rural research systems.** Marybeth Gasman<sup>1</sup> and the Centers for Minority Serving Institutions at the University of Pennsylvania and Rutgers University argue that despite the differences in history, size, and focus, there is much to be gained by exploring and building on the commonalities of MSIs across institutional types. For example, in their brief in this series, Gasman and colleagues discuss the potential of community-based participatory research and the crucial role of MSIs in “centering and grounding the production of knowledge in rural voices and concerns, and addressing power imbalances in research and practice.”
- **Establishing a shared research agenda for rural equity will require connecting existing networks of rural research institutions and scholars,** along with expanding networks to include more diverse and presently missing or marginalized perspectives. This means acknowledging and learning more about the distinctions in minority higher education and research systems, and integrating scholarship led by minority researchers that focuses on either rural or racial equity issues. The overview in this brief helps consider some connections that could be made, along with key future research questions, for example:
  - *The land-grant university system encompasses three categories of institution – 57 universities designated as 1862 institutions, which are often the main public or flagship university in every state and tend to be predominantly white;* 19 (out of 100 total) HBCUs; and all 32 accredited TCUs. There are systems and mechanisms in place to pursue cooperative research between these institutions under the purview of the US Department of Agriculture, specifically the four rural regional development centers. To what extent is this potential cooperation a reality that engages HBCUs and TCUs in a meaningful way? What are the barriers and facilitators to cooperative research in this context?
  - *HBCUs represent a long-established national system of higher education with a clear mission to advance the education of Black Americans.* At least ten HBCUs are already recognized as doctoral universities with high research activity (R2), and some of these aspire to rise to the top level of university research institutions (R1). To what extent does this research activity have relevance to rural issues? What incentives or resources might stimulate new or accelerate existing research with a rural focus?
  - *There appears to be a robust ecosystem of Indigenous research, of which TCUs are a small but important player.* Is there a case for expanding the research mission at some TCUs? How can rural research be more inclusive of TCUs? What considerations are there around engaging Tribal governments as a part of the Indigenous research infrastructure?
- **Future research should take a critical lens to how rural research systems are supported and funded.** It should also further examine ways that discrimination and racism embedded into our systems, which affect communities of color across most aspects of our society, also impede MSIs and minority scholars from engaging in rural research systems. A more detailed understanding of institutional infrastructure, funding streams, and decision-making within these research networks will help identify systemic barriers and ways to dismantle those in order to fully encourage, support, and resource MSIs as a critical player in rural equity research.

In summary, future research and action should examine the opportunities and barriers to shifting power and resources to minority-serving institutions and scholars in owning, leading, and setting research agendas that directly address issues of rural and racial equity.



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**NOTE:** An earlier version of this brief unintentionally omitted the WWAMI Rural Health Research Center from our list on page 4. This updated version includes all nine FORHP-funded Rural Health Research Centers. This correction was made on September 5, 2023.

Since 1985, the **Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (Aspen CSG)** has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Aspen CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field. The foundation of our work is the **Thrive Rural Framework** – a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.