

What Expanding Native American Representation in the Legal Field Can Teach Us About Building a More Diverse Financial Services Industry

INTRODUCTION

Creating an inclusive financial system—one that enables everyone to access, use, and reap the benefits of a full suite of financial products for stability, resilience, and long-term financial security—requires financial service providers to reflect the diversity of the people and the communities across the United States. [Diverse staff representation across organizations](#), including at the highest levels of decision-making, in the financial services industry can increase the likelihood that these providers provide relevant products and services and that these systems better serve people. In this case study, we look at the focused efforts to build Native American representation in the legal field and consider how these successful, intentional approaches can help us understand how to build a more diverse and inclusive workplace in the financial services industry, too.

In the span of about fifty years, the number of Native American attorneys has grown from just about two dozen in the early 1970s to roughly 2,500 today, and now proportionally represents the Native population. The decision to build out a critical mass of Native attorneys was done with intention and dedicated resources, and has been hugely beneficial for many tribes, enabling them to much more effectively advocate for and protect their rights and interests.

Like the legal system, the financial system is another sector where Native representation is crucial to ensuring that tribal rights and interests are respected and upheld. “We can’t have tribal sovereignty without economic sovereignty,” explained one of the nation’s few Native Americans working in senior management at a major bank. “If tribes don’t have the money they need to provide the services that are important to their members, that’s important, and that is how I see this work.” However, unlike the legal field, there are currently few Native Americans working in finance and banking. As a result, tribes have fewer resources to protect their economic sovereignty and capitalize on new business and economic opportunities.

“My job isn’t only about working for a place like my employer,” said the banker. “It’s also about getting a skill set that you can use later for other opportunities.” As an example of some of those opportunities, they cited the maturing of the casino and gaming markets and its implications for future economic development in Indian Country. “The next stage can’t be reliant on gaming. We need new lines of business, and I am not sure that the tribes are prepared for that. We need to have more tribal people who think in those terms.”

Recognizing the urgent need to build out Native representation in finance and banking, as well as the potential to draw lessons from the push for more Native attorneys and apply them to this shortage, the Aspen Institute Financial Security Program (Aspen FSP) and Wells Fargo have partnered to better understand the most crucial drivers behind the success of the Native attorney movement. Between December 2023 and February 2024, in addition to interviewing the previously mentioned Native banker, staff from the two organizations interviewed three Native attorneys who have achieved significant professional success and used their legal training to advance tribal interests. The goal of the interviews was to learn more about how and why they chose their careers, what infrastructure and supports enabled them to pursue their careers, and what they suggest for meaningfully increasing Native American representation in the financial sector.

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This document summarizes the key takeaways from those interviews. Notably, the interviews showed that the Native attorney movement has succeeded, in part, because supports are available through the early career lifecycle, beginning with high school. Also, these interviews made clear that the Native attorney movement is a replicable effort. With the right leadership and investment, similar success can be achieved in banking and finance.

HIGH SCHOOL

When asked to share how they arrived in their current positions, most of the interviewees started their response by talking about high school, highlighting the power of the teenage years to influence future choices. Whether a high school teacher encouraged them to study law or their parents took them to a community meeting where they noticed their tribal leaders deferred to the attorneys, most of the interviewees cited a specific high school experience that determined their course of study in college and, in turn, future career. Given the power of these youthful years to influence career choices, the interviewees stressed the need to engage Native youth prior to the college admissions process. “You have to reach them early,” said one interviewee.

Native teens need to know that they have career options.

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Again and again, interviewees talked about how little they knew about their career options when considering where to go to college and what to study. Instead, in effect, they understood law to be the only real path for a college-bound Native teen looking to make a difference in their community. “I didn’t even know what banking was,” explained the banker, who entered college prepared to study law but instead took a job in investment banking upon graduation. “I was planning to go to law school. But then attorneys on some of the deals I was working on told me there were already a lot of Native attorneys but not a lot of Native bankers and that maybe I should continue on this finance path.”

While the interviewees universally expressed satisfaction with their choices, they stressed the importance of educating Native teens on the many other career trajectories available to them. “Most kids want to be professionals but banking as a profession, or management generally, wouldn’t occur to them,” said one of the attorneys. “They need to be told that this is possible, that this is not magic. It’s hard work... They need to be presented with options and told, ‘You really can be anything.’”

Native teens need help to understand the connections between their commitment to their tribe and various career paths.

Each of the four interviewees cited their desire to support their tribe as the driving force behind their career choices. “I didn’t choose a career as much as I chose a cause, and that really was the empowerment of tribal nations,” said one of the lawyers. Explained another attorney, “You have to feel like you’re doing [this work] for

your tribe. It's not singular, it's not like I am doing this for my career and for me. I don't think it works like that with Native people."

That said, understanding how various career paths, including those related to finance and banking, might connect to work that can benefit the tribe is not necessarily obvious to Native youth and thus needs to be made explicit. This includes helping young people to understand the idea that education and work experience can be used to acquire tools to apply to issues of tribal sovereignty. As one interviewee said, "If we are directing these kids towards this work with a tribal overlay, we have to show them that these things that seem abstract—finance, banking, public administration—have real applications in our communities, and we have to demonstrate that this is how it works. You have to tell them what they can do with a Master of Business Administration."

Intentional Approaches

To help Native teens to more fully understand their career options, and the linkages between those options and tribal sovereignty, interviewees suggested:

1. "Put the ideas in front of the kids" by hanging flyers about career opportunities in tribal community centers and other places these kids gather.
2. Create opportunities for Native high schoolers to hear from successful Native businesspeople who can share relatable stories.
3. Solicit endorsements from tribal leaders for a wider range of career paths.
4. Establish summer programs that expose Native teens to various business sectors and professional options.
5. Reach out to, and recruit from, tribes that have sovereign wealth funds. Their members may be especially interested and invested in banking and finance as a pathway to promoting tribal sovereignty.

HIGHER EDUCATION

As with the high school years, it is important to reach out to Native college students early in their time on campus to ensure that they understand their professional options and create an appropriate course of study to support their career goals. However, unlike in high school, where the student may either live in a tribal community or routinely interact with other tribal members, Natives in higher education risk isolation. Depending on the institution they attend, they may or may not find other Native students, staff, or mentors who understand their unique experiences and can support them to achieve their goals. Buffering against that risk of isolation, whether social, cultural, or emotional, is crucial to ensuring that Native students thrive in college and/or graduate school.

For two of the Native attorneys interviewed for this project, both of whom attended law school in the 1970s and were among the first wave of Natives to train as attorneys, much of that social, emotional, and professional

support came through the [Pre-Law Summer Institute](#) (PLSI). Created over 50 years ago, with eventual funding from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the PLSI was, at that point in time, an intensive summer program with financial and mentoring support for Native students interested in attending law school. Housed at the University of New Mexico (UNM), the program sought to expose students to a pre-law education.

Interestingly, though hosted by UNM School of Law, the PLSI was not only for students enrolling in that institution. Rather, program attendees went on to attend law schools at a range of institutions, helping to build a nationwide network of Native attorneys who could support each other and facilitate networking and professional opportunities for one another.

For the two interviewees who attended the PLSI, the summer program provided supports they considered critical to their success. “That institute dramatically reduced the intimidation factor and made you feel comfortable, like, ‘I can do this and can compete on this level,’” said one PLSI graduate. According to the interviewees, PLSI achieved this by providing participants with access to mentors and peers, and also by helping them to identify clear career pathways in the legal profession. Though neither the third attorney nor the banker attended the PLSI, they were aware of the program and its impact and identified these same supports as crucial to successfully navigating higher education while also prioritizing their desires to work in the interest of their tribes.

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Native students need to be able to identify clear professional pathways for various careers.

For some students, the path through school to a career may seem straightforward. For others, it is more opaque, especially for Native students who may not know people who have already blazed the trail or have access to the robust career-building infrastructure available to many of their white counterparts.

When discussing their experience as an undergraduate student at an Ivy League institution, one interviewee said, “There was such a huge pathway out of my school and into finance. But that pathway was seen as being for the rich white kids. It wasn’t for us. Those kids had fraternities and parents to prepare them for those interviews. We need to build that capacity to support Native students.”

Native students need robust support systems, including mentors, peer groups, and professional networks.

All four of the interviewees cited support systems as crucial to their success in their undergraduate and/or graduate program. In some cases, the support came through student associations. As one interviewee explained, “The Native American Law Students Association helped us to think and talk about what we would do with our degrees and to understand how important that work could be.” For the banker, meaningful support came from participation in efforts such as [The Consortium for Graduate Study in Management](#), a nonprofit organization that seeks to improve inclusion in business education and across workplace sectors. Programs such as these helped

them to navigate their transition to business school and build upon their professional networks during their time on campus. In both cases, connecting with other students pursuing similar interests and/or paths created important networking opportunities, motivation, guidance and, in some instances, a shared sense of purpose.

For other interviewees, the support came through less formal channels. One interviewee spoke of a professor who helped him secure a summer internship with a legal services organization. As the interviewee described, “That summer, I had meetings with influential people in D.C. and that’s where I learned about the advocacy work going on all over the country,” efforts they later joined.

Another spoke of the encouragement they received from their own community. “Tribal court advocates, who are lay practitioners, would tell me that I needed to go to law school because there were very few Native attorneys,” said one of the lawyers with regards to the time they spent after college and before graduate school working in the Tribal court system. “That really encouraged me. It was like they were saying, ‘We weren’t able to do it, but you can do it,’ and that really inspired me to go to law school.”

Intentional Approaches

To help Native students to succeed academically, emotionally, and socially in undergraduate and graduate programs, and to support them to pursue their desired career paths, interviewees suggested:

1. Establish a summer “boot camp” program, similar to the PLSI, to help prepare students to succeed in business school. Like the PLSI, the program could accept both students who are already enrolled in a business school and those who are still considering whether or not to apply as a way to encourage enrollment, reduce the intimidation factor, and equip students to succeed.
2. Provide Native students with scholarships. By doing so, higher education is more attainable; then, once in school, students are able to concentrate more fully on their studies. Potential scholarship sources might include The Consortium Fellowship offered by most of the nation’s most competitive business schools, the [American Indian College Fund](#), and the [Native Forward Scholars Fund](#).
3. Assist Native students—both undergraduate and graduate students—to identify and secure summer internships and other forms of experiential learning in relevant fields. Doing so creates more opportunities to explore various career paths and build professional networks.
4. Invite members from tribes with sovereign wealth funds to speak at and participate in relevant business school events to raise the visibility of tribal wealth funds, promote the connection between investing and tribal sovereignty, and recruit interns and employees.

EARLY CAREER

Unlike higher education, the early years of a career usually come with fewer resources and supports, especially for Native professionals who may struggle to reconcile the values of their tribal communities with those of most modern employers. “You can feel like you’re working for the enemy. So, you’re dealing with that while feeling like you don’t have your sea legs yet, and it’s tricky,” said one of the attorneys, describing their early years working at a major law firm. They continued, “I think the way you solve for that is to have folks in your community who understand why you’re doing the work you’re doing and don’t think you’re a traitor and keep giving you support. I did have people like that from Indian Country.” Ensuring other Native professionals have that same type of support is critical. So, too, are the leadership skills necessary to thrive in a career.

Support systems, including mentors, peer groups, and professional networks, remain crucial.

Similar to their experiences on campus, the interviewees agreed that support systems remain an important resource in the early stages of a Native professional’s career. Here, too, those supports can take a range of forms. For example, one of the attorneys cited the [National Native American Bar Association](#) (NNABA) as an important resource in the establishment of the law as a career pathway for Natives. NNABA and associations like it build on the continuum of support and provide professional development and networking opportunities within communities that share cultural understandings and considerations.

For the banker, support came from the founder of the Native American Bank, who provided encouragement when they felt “attacked as a tribal person” because of the transactional nature of their work. The banker also sought community with other colleagues of color, including those who were African American and Hispanic, and was eventually inspired to start a “Native American employee network” at their employer, then a major Wall Street institution, to create a space for fellow Native professionals to network and socialize.

Leadership training can equip Native employees with the necessary skills to achieve both personal and professional goals.

“**There was a need for a lot of emotional intelligence and help figuring out my vision.**”

At least one of the interviewees spoke of wishing they’d received more leadership training earlier in their career. Specifically, they argued that when a Native professional is the only—or even one of a very few—Natives working for an employer or in an industry, they are at risk of being tokenized and, as such, can feel enormous pressure to succeed in their position. Leadership training can help equip Native professionals to manage that pressure, and thrive in their work, by boosting the soft skills critical to career success.

As they explained, “I was a good lawyer but was coming into a new scene with power players and I needed to be an expert in a huge arena, where there was a need for a lot of emotional intelligence and help figuring out my vision. You’re in the big leagues now, and you have got to have a way to figure out how it works and that is not about academics. It’s not about your degree. I wasn’t prepared with the softer skills.”

Intentional Approaches

To help Native professionals successfully navigate the first years of their careers as well as feel supported and understood in environments that risk tokenizing or alienating them, interviewees suggested:

1. Create opportunities for late-stage, successful professionals in banking and finance to “give back” to younger generations through intensive mentorship, lighter-touch connections, and formal professional networks.
2. Create explicit narratives that connect the contributions in financial services to the thriving of Native Americans to keep early-career professionals committed to their field.

CONCLUSION

This concerted undertaking in the legal profession offers transferable lessons that, when supported with the necessary leadership, commitment, and resources, can be recreated to expand the representation of Native Americans, or other underrepresented people, in the financial services industry. Having a diverse and coordinated set of private and public institutions, champions, and community support, starting as early as in high school, can create pathways that nurture and grow the ranks of Native bankers and finance professionals. And while it's neither easy nor fast, this approach is crucial—and imperative—for moving the U.S. toward a more inclusive economy that serves everyone and allows people to contribute to, take part in, and benefit from our economic system.

Acknowledgments

The Aspen Institute Financial Security Program is grateful to the Native attorneys and banker who shared their experience, expertise, and insights with us to develop this brief. Aspen FSP also thanks Wells Fargo for their generous support. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this brief—as well as any errors—are Aspen FSP's alone and do not necessarily represent the views of its funders or other participants in this work.