



# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY



*Participants in the Career Pathways Small Business Sector, 2014. Left to right: Daniel Wilson, Kevin Smith, Hadessa Johns, David Johnson, Rodney Johns, Lilia Lumus, Richard Lyons, and Jeri Thomas. (Photo: Mikhail Sundust/Gila River Indian News)*

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

*A growing number of tribal nations are designing innovative approaches to cultivate the abilities of their citizens to successfully pursue careers that will empower those nations to create the futures they seek. NCAI's Partnership for Tribal Governance (PTG) has embarked on a project that works collaboratively with selected tribal nations to document their innovative approaches and share them with Indian Country.*

*The following presents the story of the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona, the fourth of four "Innovation Spotlight" case studies that PTG developed as part of this project. The four case studies were followed by a workforce development toolkit for tribal leaders and key decision-makers, which was released in 2018. The toolkit explores common challenges and emerging trends in tribal workforce development, and also presents lessons learned, policy recommendations, and questions to consider for tribal leaders and workforce development practitioners.*

## Introduction

*“When we see these participants leave as certified phlebotomists, fire fighters, construction workers, we proudly shake their hands and tell them, ‘Good job! You did this all for yourself and your family. You chose to pursue this pathway and achieve your lifelong goal. We were simply there to support you and mentor you; you did everything on your own. It’s a very proud moment.’”*

*– Alfreda Brown, Training Coordinator, Gila River Indian Community  
Employment & Training Department<sup>1</sup>*

The Gila River Indian Community (GRIC or Community) is a federally recognized tribal nation located adjacent to the sprawling metropolis of Phoenix in south-central Arizona. Residing on the 372,000-acre Gila River Indian Reservation, the Community is comprised of nearly 22,000 enrolled members who claim lineage from one or both of two peoples – the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh<sup>2</sup> – who “share the space and resources of the Gila River lands.”<sup>3</sup>

The Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh together carved out a relatively peaceful and prosperous existence, fueled primarily by a system of farming sustained by their shrewd stewardship of the limited water supply that their arid Sonoran Desert environment yielded. But following the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, which saw the United States assume control of southern Arizona from Mexico, white settlers began flooding the region, encroaching upon these tribal lands and diverting the water of the Gila River upon which tribal people depended.<sup>4</sup> By the 1870s and 1880s, Gila River’s agriculture-driven economy had been decimated, forcing the people to rely on the U.S. and its unhealthy program of government commodities for their survival.<sup>5</sup>

This desperate state of affairs prevailed through the 1930s, when the federal government’s construction of Coolidge Dam and channeling of water to the Gila River Valley enabled the Community to regain a semblance of its agricultural lifeways, marking the beginning of a “long climb out of the economic trenches” for the Gila River people.<sup>6</sup> Over the next several decades, they strove to return to a state of economic self-sufficiency. First, they took advantage of the growing number of wage-earning jobs available in Phoenix and elsewhere off-reservation, then increasingly they worked to develop a diversified yet integrated, reservation-centered economy.

Today, Gila River’s burgeoning economic renaissance is evident in its array of Community-owned and operated businesses, which include recreational facilities, industrial and business parks, a retail outlet center, sand and gravel company, telecommunications company, and utility authority. It also features a leasing and financing corporation that helps to finance these ventures as well as Community member-entrepreneurs seeking to start their own small businesses in Gila River’s emerging private sector.<sup>7</sup> The Community also profitably operates three casinos and two resorts, capitalizing on its close proximity to Phoenix. Meanwhile, the Community’s Gila River Farms cultivates 15,000 acres of crops. Community and Community member-owned agricultural operations are set to expand dramatically in the coming years thanks to the Arizona Water Settlement Act of 2004, which marked the culmination of Gila River’s decades-long struggle to reclaim control over a significant portion of its aboriginal water supply.<sup>8</sup>

On the government side, Gila River has aggressively reclaimed control of its own affairs from the federal government, forging Public Law 93-638 contracts and compacts with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service to develop and administer programs and services in key areas such as health care, law enforcement, and public safety.<sup>9</sup> The Community now runs its own police and fire departments, and it operates its own court system in a state-of-the-art justice complex.<sup>10</sup> Altogether, Gila River’s growing governmental operations currently employ about 2,000 people, while its business operations employ nearly 4,000 people.<sup>11</sup>

## **An Approach “All Over the Place”<sup>12</sup>**

Gila River’s flourishing businesses and governmental growth has spurred a significant increase in the number of available tribal jobs, but the Community has encountered difficulties in ensuring that its members take full advantage of these opportunities. As evidence of the Community’s uphill climb in this regard, in 2013 it was still wrestling with an unemployment rate eclipsing 30 percent, a primary factor in its stubbornly high poverty rate of 52 percent.<sup>13</sup> And while 46 percent of those employed in GRIC government are enrolled Community members, the Community and its leadership have long sought to drive that percentage higher until Gila River eventually reaches the day when all Community-supported jobs are held by its own people.<sup>14</sup> At the heart of the issue was the fact that Gila River’s demand for the labor it needed to operate its government and various businesses was outpacing the supply that its people could aptly provide. Too often, Community members lacked the education, skills, and credentials they needed to land the tribal jobs they sought.<sup>15</sup> This left tribal employers frequently looking outside of the Community for qualified candidates to fill open positions.

***“We have all of these jobs – which is not typical of a lot of reservations. But we have many low-skilled Community members that can’t compete in their own job market.”***

***– Lana Chanda, Director, Employment & Training Department,  
Gila River Indian Community***

In addition to its abundance of unskilled and under-skilled job-seekers, Gila River discovered many young adults and adults with little to no work experience<sup>16</sup>, little motivation to find work, and/or a lack of awareness of the education and training resources that Gila River and its employers had to offer to put them on the path to a successful career and productive life. And like elsewhere in Indian Country, a lack of transportation presented a challenge for many Community members desiring training and employment on their expansive reservation.

Confronting these challenges was Gila River’s “disjointed” constellation of workforce education and training efforts spread across the Community.<sup>17</sup> The enterprises owned and operated by the Community each had their own individual training programs to prepare prospective and newly hired employees for employment. Meanwhile, multiple entities within tribal government – including the Employment & Training Department, Human Resources Department, and Tribal

Employment Rights Office (TERO) Office – also offered employment resources and services to job seekers, but these efforts were not well coordinated. In addition, the government’s training opportunities were not programmatically synced with those offered by Gila River’s businesses. This dynamic fostered duplications of services in some places and, consequently, an “unnecessary waste” of the Community’s limited workforce development resources.<sup>18</sup>

Complicating this situation was the fact that the Community’s training programs relied on standard “off-the-shelf” curricula that did not account for the particular needs of local employers or the distinct challenges faced by those being trained.<sup>19</sup> Also at play was a “get people employed mentality”<sup>20</sup> among Workforce Investment Act (WIA) program staff members who connected Community member clients with job training and job openings as quickly as possible in order to generate the numbers they needed to satisfy their requirements for the WIA program and other grants. When those hasty referrals didn’t pan out – as was typically the case – clients returned to try again, creating a revolving door effect of the same clients seeking the same assistance from one year to the next.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the Community also faced a shifting landscape in terms of the qualifications that its members needed in order to get hired in the 21st century economy, with nearly half of all new jobs requiring a post-secondary degree, and the fastest-growing jobs demanding an associate’s degree.<sup>22</sup> Altogether, these factors – combined with Gila River’s fairly young population, featuring a median age of 22.7 years<sup>23</sup> – compelled the Community to seek a new approach to developing and growing its workforce.

## **New “Pathways” Forward for Gila River**

Charged by Gila River’s elected leadership with setting a new course, in 2010 the Community’s Employment & Training Department (E&T) obtained a technical assistance grant from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) to support the Community’s development of a comprehensive workforce development approach.<sup>24</sup> As part of the grant, E&T team members attended two three-day training institutes in Washington, D.C., where they learned from experts about the “Career Pathways” model. DOL had been funding selected state WIA grantees to implement the model for years.<sup>25</sup> Among other attributes, the model “connects job training, education, and employment systems,” and also puts employers in charge of designing their own training programs and the curricula they deploy.<sup>26</sup> E&T immediately embraced Career Pathways as a natural fit for Gila River, and resolved to design its own version of the approach – whether the Community received funding from DOL to do so or not.<sup>27</sup> But as fortune would have it, in 2012, DOL’s Workforce Innovation Fund awarded the Community a \$3 million, three-year grant to implement the model, making Gila River the first tribal nation in the country to receive a Career Pathways grant.<sup>28</sup>

There were important practical lessons to be drawn from the experiences of the many Career Pathways grantees that had preceded Gila River, and the Community committed to learning those lessons so that it would know best how to “define it for ourselves.”<sup>29</sup> State-based grantees had made the model work, but how could Gila River make it work in *Indian Country*, specifically for *its people* given their distinct needs and challenges and the Community’s particular workforce development priorities? Being that Career Pathways was untrodden ground for Indian Country –

and with only three years of grant funding to break that ground – Gila River set out to make Career Pathways its own through a methodical, 18-month process to design a Community-based workforce development system.<sup>30</sup>

At the outset, E&T retained the 10-person “core” team that it had established for the original DOL technical assistance grant to helm the Career Pathways initiative. The core team – since renamed the Career Pathways Advisory Committee – has grown to include representatives from Gila River’s E&T, Education, and Human Resources departments; its TERO Office; its Executive Branch; the Community’s Hu Hu Kam Memorial Hospital, Wild Horse Pass Casino and alternative schools; as well as Central Arizona Community College, Mesa Community College, the Central Arizona Association of Governments, and the Gila/Pinal Workforce Investment Area. Boasting extensive workforce training experience, the Advisory Committee was tasked with leading the creation of a community-driven plan that met the identified priorities and needs of the Community and its members. Also initially contributing to the process was a 30-member “resource” team to advise the Advisory Committee, provide feedback on its progress, and help to create lasting partnerships between participating tribal departments and programs, tribal employers, educational institutions, and the community.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, E&T used part of the DOL grant funds to establish six new Career Pathways (CP) staff positions to implement the plan and “handle the influx of new participants,” and also hired a mandatory evaluator to assess the initiative’s progress over the life of the grant.<sup>32</sup>

***“You really have to assess your community and learn what the needs are. We learned that in order to launch our people into certain careers that we needed to know more about the employers’ needs.”***

***– Elisia Manuel, WIOA Outreach Coordinator,  
Gila River Employment & Training Department***

Recognizing that it needed to more deeply understand Gila River’s present approach before it could effectively craft a strategic workforce development plan for Gila River’s future, the CP team conducted a comprehensive, frank assessment of the Community’s government and enterprises to gain a handle on the true extent of its workforce training needs and the shortcomings of its pre-CP training programs both individually and collectively.<sup>33</sup> Since there was no existing useful data to consult, the team held separate fact-finding meetings with tribal employers, area higher education institutions, and Gila River’s workforce training providers. In addition to the challenges mentioned above, these meetings illuminated the following issues: reservation employers lacked awareness about the Community’s workforce training services and how to access them, employers were not sharing relevant information and resources with one another (even in the same sector), the Community itself did not have a firm handle on the reservation’s labor market, and Gila River’s job-seekers – like the Community itself – lacked awareness about what jobs were available where. To remedy the last two issues, the CP team created and implemented its own labor market survey with local tribal and non-tribal employers to learn where the needs were greatest and, in turn, where it needed to concentrate its strategic focus and energy.<sup>34</sup>

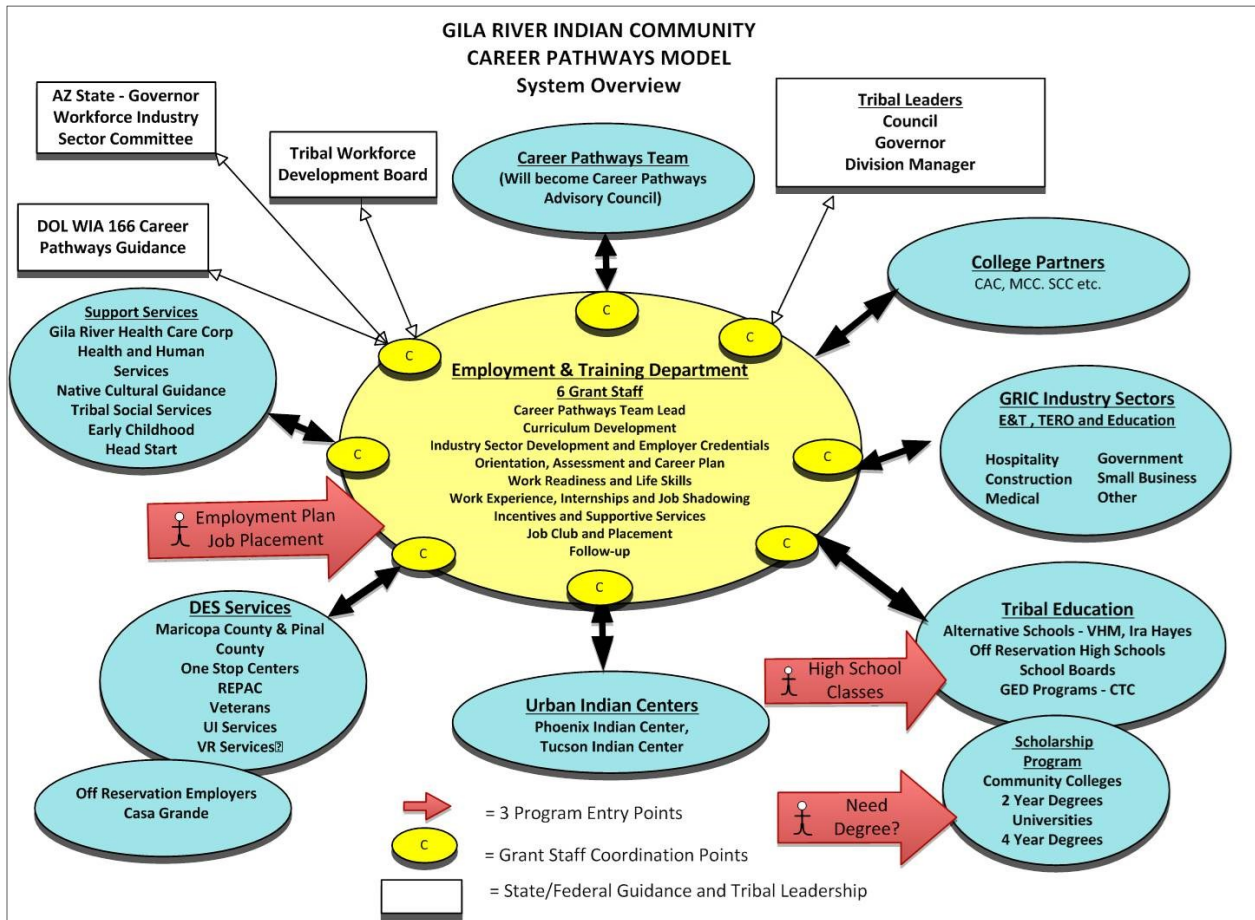
The CP team’s in-depth analysis not only illuminated critical gaps and disconnects in their existing approach, it affirmed the need to place the Gila River people – their concerns, challenges, talents, and aspirations – at the center of the Community’s unique design of its Career Pathways initiative. Armed with this knowledge, the CP staff – working in unison with the Advisory Committee – set out to create a participant-centered, synthesized approach capable of comprehensively serving all Gila River members looking to the Community for support in preparing for and embarking on rewarding, sustainable careers. Among other things, this meant going beyond those unemployed, low-income, and underemployed adults already eligible to be served by the E&T-administered WIA program. CP proceeded to adopt the WIA and subsequently Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) eligibility standards, but then expanded eligibility to also offer Career Pathways to a select number of incumbent workers and job-seekers above the income eligibility level set by the federal government, relying on an infusion of supplemental funding provided by Gila River’s government in order to cover the additional cost.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, the CP staff catalogued all locally available tribal and non-tribal support resources to create a “resource bank” guide of the resources and services that participants could rely on during each step on their Career Pathways journey.<sup>36</sup> The CP team also tackled head-on the financial challenges that many of its participants were bound to face. “Career Pathways is able to pay for a variety of things,” explains Lynette Clark, former E&T Curriculum Specialist. “We pay for their tuition, we pay for mileage, we pay for trainings. They can even receive an internship and the internship pays them while they apply what they’re learning in class.”<sup>37</sup>

Building on its status as an established, State of Arizona-recognized One-Stop Center, E&T also seized on Career Pathways as an opportunity to fully centralize all of its workforce development-related services under one roof – both in their physical location and programmatic coordination. In addition to Career Pathways and Gila River’s state- and federal-funded WIOA programs, E&T also currently oversees (among others) Gila River’s TERO Office; Native Employment Works, a TANF program; a tribally-funded AmeriCorps program for veterans; and the state-funded Department of Economic Security program. Meanwhile, the State of Arizona’s Wagner-Peyser Employment Service and Dislocated Worker program maintain a regular presence at E&T’s reservation location, and the state’s Rehabilitation Services Administration program for individuals with disabilities travels to the location monthly to provide services to Community members (and at other times upon Gila River’s request).<sup>38</sup> As E&T Director Lana Chanda explains, “It’s easier to share when all resources are all in one place, when all workforce programs are in one place. We don’t work in silos; we are working together. People come into our department, they have a variety of things they can rely on. We serve all Community members.”<sup>39</sup>

Last but not least, Gila River’s “forward-thinking” design process featured some critical initial steps to ensure the viability of Career Pathways long beyond the life of the DOL grant, notably the production of the GRIC Career Pathways Toolkit, which will provide the initiative with a system framework upon which to rely as “as the work shifted from the Career Pathways Team and into the specific sectors.”<sup>40</sup> It also established a permanent advisory council to engage in long-term strategy development.<sup>41</sup> Composed of the chairs of CP’s industry sectors (see page 8) as well as key stakeholders in education and workforce development, the advisory council meets monthly to evaluate the initiative’s progress and craft strategies to enhance the success of the sectors.<sup>42</sup>

**FIGURE 1: GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY CAREER PATHWAYS MODEL: SYSTEM OVERVIEW (COURTESY OF GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING DEPARTMENT)**



## The Solution: Building a System Customized to Gila River

Gila River’s methodical design process culminated in the launch of a comprehensive, employer-led workforce development *system* customized to the particular needs and short- and long-term priorities of the Community’s workforce, its employers, and the tribal nation as a whole (see Figure 1 above). Seamlessly integrating occupational skills training, basic skills education, and employment, Gila River’s version of Career Pathways combines contextual learning with academic and career counseling, wrap-around support services (particularly at key points of professional transition), and ongoing support of participants as they implement their career plans.<sup>43</sup> The unifying goal of CP’s many stakeholders is to enhance in targeted fashion the skills of its workforce – both its unemployed and employed citizens – “so that getting a job and advancing in a job is easier.”<sup>44</sup>

What makes Gila River’s rendering of Career Pathways fundamentally different than state-based CP approaches is its multi-sector, highly localized focus. While state-based CP approaches typically

tackle the *common* workforce needs of one or perhaps two industry sectors across a broad region or an entire state, Gila River – eager to leverage CP as a valuable tool in its ongoing effort to build a sustainable, reservation-centered economy – opted to deploy it across several sectors, addressing the *specific* workforce needs of individual tribal employers “on a case-by-case basis.”<sup>45</sup>

In order to determine which industry sectors it should address, the CP team worked to identify the areas of greatest need for skilled and credentialed workers, both now and in the future. After a thorough investigation, it initially decided to target four high-growth, high-labor demand sectors that the Community had deemed as top priorities: Construction, Government, Hospitality, and Medical.<sup>46</sup> The GRIC Council formally approved these proposed sectors in April 2012. Shortly thereafter, the CP team added a fifth sector: Small Business. Overviews of the sectors are below.

**Construction:** With Gila River’s economic rebirth came an increased need to build businesses, homes, and physical infrastructure across the reservation. At the outset, a significant portion of the dollars that Gila River slated for construction flowed out of the Community through contracts awarded mostly to non-Native contractors. Seeking to train its largely untrained construction workforce with the long-term goal of creating a sizeable cadre of Gila River contractors, Gila River chose construction as a CP sector.<sup>47</sup> Gila River’s Community Housing, Housing Development, and Tribal Projects departments partnered with the National Center for Construction Education and Research and the Arizona Builders Alliance to create an internationally recognized certification program for Pre-Apprenticeship, Building Trades, and Facilities Maintenance occupations. Key to the sector’s early success has been CP’s seamless integration of Gila River’s WIOA and TERO clients, which has strengthened the wrap-around nature of the sector’s training and employment efforts. According to Chanda, “Now it’s more of a one-stop concept, because people can come to this department [E&T] and get a temporary TERO job, or they can prepare for long-term, career-based employment through our WIOA program. People can now go to one place to choose and have the benefit of both.”<sup>48</sup>

**Government:** Gila River zeroed in on the types of governmental employment of greatest need and greatest deficit in terms of the proportion of current staff who were Community members. Off the bat, the Government Sector team conducted a thorough assessment of Gila River’s human resources system, identifying priority areas where the Community could train its own to successfully land governmental positions as they became available. Soon after CP’s inception, the team pursued a partnership between E&T and the Gila River Fire Department, resulting in a formal MOU between the departments in 2014 to work with Chandler-Gilbert Community College and Mesa Community College to train Firefighter Apprentice cohorts entirely composed of Community members.<sup>49</sup> The hope was that by taking the cohort approach, Gila River trainees would stand the greatest chance of completing the rigorous program and getting hired by the Fire Department, with the long-term goal of having the Department fully staffed by Community members.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the GRIC Council stepped up, raising the number of the Department’s reserve firefighter positions to accommodate this focused capacity building investment.<sup>51</sup> Those who finish the program are placed with the Department in a reserve capacity, and once openings become available, they are hired full-time through Gila River’s Human Resources Department.

**Hospitality:** CP’s initial meetings with tribal employers – specifically the Community’s sizable casino and resort operations – illuminated the need to develop a Hospitality Sector with a



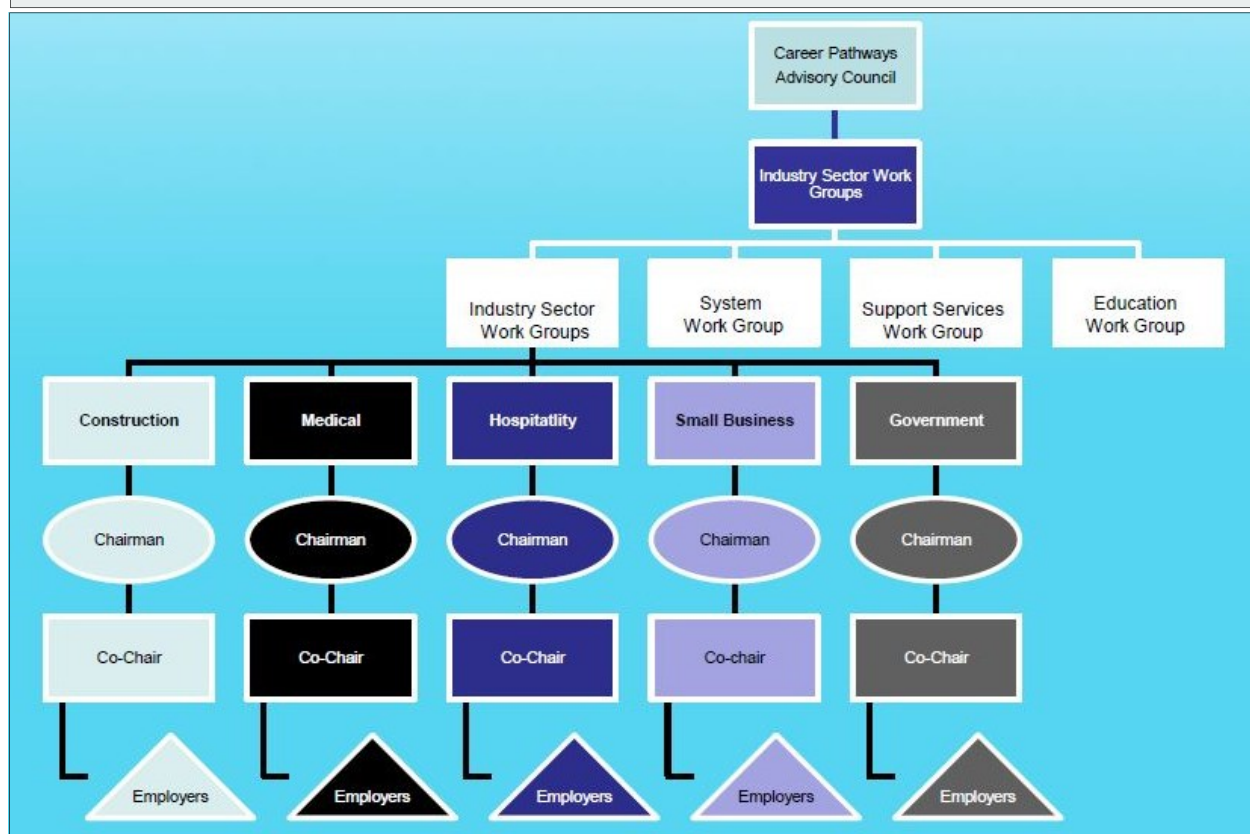


***Firefighter Apprentice trainee Jessica Lewis learns how to ventilate a building during a fire training drill. For more on Jessica’s story, see page 17. (Photo: Gila River Employment & Training Department)***

targeted focus on not only building but retaining Gila River’s occupational capacity in the culinary arts. An initial survey revealed that the sector’s employers had a staggering 52 percent annual turnover rate among their employees. Looking to reduce this rate and its associated costs and increase the number of Gila River members who get and keep jobs in this field, CP forged a partnership between Spectra Food Services & Hospitality (the main contractor responsible for managing its food and beverage operations at its casinos and resorts) and Central Arizona College to develop an employer-designed, one credit “Culinary Boot Camp” course for Community members seeking culinary jobs with tribal employers. Following the Boot Camp, participants must then complete a 3-6 month work experience placement before being hired.<sup>52</sup> The sector also launched a similar youth track for this career pathway, creating a partnership between the reservation’s Ira Hayes High School and South Mountain Community College to train high school seniors in the culinary arts.<sup>53</sup>

**Medical:** The medical field proved a top priority for Gila River based on CP’s initial meetings with Gila River Health Care (GRHC). The Community’s Hu Hu Kam Hospital and other healthcare facilities already were in dire need of medical assistants and phlebotomists, and with its Hau’pal Health Center (that will employ nearly 400 workers) slated to open in 2018, that need was only going to increase. A deeper analysis revealed the need for investing in capacity building in three additional medical-based occupations – Hemodialysis Technician, Medical Billing & Coding, and Ophthalmology Assistant – bringing the sector’s total number of career pathways to five.<sup>54</sup> GRHC partnered with the Maricopa Skills Center and South Mountain Community College to design one non-clinical track (certified coder) and two clinical tracks that include options for specialized training for the more advanced occupational pathways. Participants’ completion of any of these tracks makes them immediately eligible for employment by GRHC.<sup>55</sup>

**FIGURE 2: GRIC CAREER PATHWAYS SYSTEM STRUCTURE (COURTESY OF GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING DEPARTMENT)**



**Small Business:** Dubbed the “backbone of our economy” by a former governor<sup>56</sup> of GRIC, small businesses were added to the Career Pathways sector mix shortly after the initiative’s launch. The decision flowed from two immediate objectives: (1) support the growth of the roughly three dozen existing Community member-owned businesses in the community, and (2) prepare aspiring Community member-entrepreneurs to start new businesses in the community, such as a T-shirt company, transportation service, and garden nursery.<sup>57</sup> The hope long-term is to build up Community member-owned businesses to the point where they can successfully compete with non-tribal vendors for contracts with Gila River’s government and enterprises so that “tribal business can be done utilizing their own people.”<sup>58</sup> CP has partnered with Chandler-Gilbert Community College to provide participants an accredited small business certification for the sector’s two tracks – Entrepreneurship and Business Administration – that combines coursework, business internships, and participants’ development of business plans.<sup>59</sup> Business owner Michael Preston, head of the Gila River Business Owners Association, formerly served as sector chair, and the Association and GRIC’s Pima Leasing & Financing Corporation have joined with E&T to help participants refine their business plans, conduct market feasibility studies, obtain business start-up financing, and provide technical assistance and support.<sup>60</sup>

Each of the five CP sectors takes full ownership in the initiative’s success by fulfilling a common, clearly defined, and clearly understood set of responsibilities to ensure success, while at the same

time exercising great latitude in designing a plan customized to the needs and intricacies of the particular industry it serves. These responsibilities include: identifying training gaps, professional credentials, and soft skills necessary for industry employment as well as individuals who can serve as career mentors to CP participants; creating standard mentoring, internship, job shadowing, and work experience programs; streamlining hiring processes; and developing advancement ladders within the industry from entry-level jobs to career-sustaining positions.<sup>61</sup>

Leading the work of each industry sector is that sector's work group (see Figure 2 on previous page), which is composed of the designated representatives of the employers that fall within that sector. The work group is headed by a chair whose job is – among other things – to spearhead development of an industry-specific system of curricula and credentialing, working in concert with those local academic institutions that the work group has identified as being best equipped to deliver said curricula.<sup>62</sup> The sector work groups each elect a representative to sit on the Advisory Committee whose job it is to inform the Committee about sector progress. The work groups also are responsible for informing the CP team about the types of life and work readiness skills training that CP participants who are routed into their particular sectors need in order to succeed in the jobs they will hold once their occupational training is complete.<sup>63</sup>

Equally vital to the effectiveness of Career Pathways has been the development by the CP staff and sector work groups of networks of mutually beneficial partnerships uniquely suited to the distinct needs and priorities of each sector and tailored to strengthening the CP support system as a whole. Utilizing Career Pathways concepts, Gila River focused intensively during its 18-month design process on identifying and securing the buy-in of the organizational partners that the Community and its employers needed in order to make Career Pathways succeed in the respective sectors it had chosen.<sup>64</sup> These networks feature mixtures of internal partnerships – between tribal departments, programs, and employers, for example – and external ones.

Chief among these external partners is the State of Arizona. Eager to avail itself of existing resources, support mechanisms, and connections to state-based workforce systems and employers, the CP team worked to connect Gila River's CP sectors with the sectors in which the State's CP initiatives already were engaged where possible, such as in the medical fields. In so doing, Gila River ensures that any skills or trades learned by Community members will meet the credentialing criteria and thus be portable if they choose to work outside of the Community for non-tribal employers in the future.<sup>65</sup> In addition, Gila River maintains valuable resource- and information-sharing partnerships with 18 other tribal nations in Arizona through its membership in the Nineteen Tribal Nations Workforce Development Area.<sup>66</sup> Altogether, according to a recent network analysis, Gila River's CP initiative features a total of 184 collaborative partnerships across its five-sector system.<sup>67</sup> As Chanda explains, "It's really amazing – everybody who comes to the table, it takes them about five minutes to see the value of this system. Everybody gets it. It's a win-win for everybody."<sup>68</sup>

At the controls of each sector's work – and the partnerships upon which that work relies – are Gila River's employers. Sharing an abiding commitment to preparing and then hiring Community members for open positions, Gila River's governmental and business employers determine the skills and credentials that Community members need to gain and sustain employment in their

operations.<sup>69</sup> They then select and forge partnerships with participating community colleges and universities to design a customized training regimen and set of industry-recognized credentials aligned with their particular needs (typically requiring those colleges to methodically adapt the standard curricula they generally teach). Meanwhile, the CP staff provides the employers and colleges and universities with the administrative support and technical assistance to sustain their partnerships.<sup>70</sup> Through this approach, Gila River's employers now have full ownership in the training of their respective workforces, increasing the incoming proficiency of the Community members that they hire and the prospects of retaining them as employees over the long run.<sup>71</sup>

The building of Gila River's Career Pathways system also has compelled tribal governmental departments and programs, tribal businesses, and other tribal entities to collaborate in new and deeper ways. CP's core team is a key locus for collaboration, but implementation of the sectors' work plans also has fostered coordination among once distant reservation players such as GRIC's Administrative Services Division, its Human Resources Department, Wild Horse Pass Development Authority, and Pima Leasing.<sup>72</sup> Among the key relationships that CP has strengthened is the one between E&T and GRIC's Education Department, which has enhanced the Community's ability to support Community members in continuing their educations and gaining the skills necessary to find work. "It brought together people who normally would not have networked with one another," explains Preston. "It brought together other organizations and opportunities for all of us."<sup>73</sup> This also has produced some additional benefits that some did not originally anticipate. As one example, CP-rooted interactions between the Gila River Business Owners Association and Gila River Health Care resulted in new sales by Community-member owned businesses through GRHC's procurement process.

Altogether, CP's "enhanced interagency coordination" and its employer-driven workforce training programming has helped to create a more streamlined and responsive workforce development system at Gila River.<sup>74</sup> It has virtually eliminated duplication among Gila River's education, workforce training, and support services; enabled the easy and efficient sharing of Gila River's available workforce development-based resources; and fostered a broad awareness by all stakeholders of those resources.<sup>75</sup> Most importantly, it has made for a simpler, shorter, and more straightforward process for Community members that choose to travel the Career Pathways route. Comparing Gila River's old way of doing workforce training with this new approach, E&T Training Coordinator Alfreda Brown explains:

"If he or she was looking at becoming a certified phlebotomist, for example, we would look at the schools in the local area, see what schools they would qualify for. Then we would refer them to see if they qualified for a scholarship with the tribe, and then get them enrolled. We would start their college paperwork and move forward. That can take at least three to six months. With Career Pathways, we explain that once you are enrolled in our program, we have already done the legwork for you. We have met with the colleges, we have a schedule ready for you to go off of, when your first course will start, how long the duration of your training will be, how many credits you will earn, a syllabus is provided for your program of study. So by the end of this time frame, you will be a certified phlebotomist. After training, we can offer participants externships, on-the-job training placements so

that they can get your foot in the door. We will offer hands-on training, which will take one to three months, and during that time our staff will work with the participant to get full-time employment. So we already have everything mapped out for them.”<sup>76</sup>

Career Pathways’ map for advancement helps CP participants – both aspiring and incumbent workers – to visualize the professional future they desire and the easily comprehensible, doable steps that they must take to achieve that future. It begins with a common application for all participants to complete no matter the sector they are entering. Then, for each sector, CP has charted out a clear sequence of educational coursework and/or training credentials that participants must complete, as well as the resources available to them at every step along their sector’s professional development path. With employers directly involved in the process, participants understand that successfully traversing that path makes them highly competitive for position openings with employers in the field they have chosen.

Career Pathways also endows Gila River’s capacity building effort with a much-needed degree of flexibility that its previous approach did not possess. It does this in two primary ways. First, it creates professional development ladders featuring industry-recognized, stackable credentials and certificates that incrementally lead to the attainment of higher-level credentials or degrees of proven value in the Gila River labor market.<sup>77</sup> These credentials and certificates are also portable, giving participants options to apply them to their current fields of study or transfer them to new fields and across sectors should they so desire.

Second, Career Pathways provides multiple points of entry as well as on- and off-ramps for program participants to enter, leave, and re-enter the CP system. Interested Community members can join Career Pathways at three points – E&T, the Education Department’s Tribal Scholarships Office, and through the reservation’s high schools.<sup>78</sup> All CP applicants – no matter their point of entry – undergo the same assessment to determine what sector they are best suited for and where they need to begin. Altogether, according to Chanda, Career Pathways’ map for advancement is providing participants with the flexibility they need to succeed on their own terms and in their own time, but also gives them something more important – hope:

“When you tell a young person or an older person what it means to be a doctor, they can’t even conceive of that. But if you give them little chunks of information or little certificates and a plan, they’re able to see that for themselves. And I think what that does is create hope within a community...when the whole community is joined together providing that hope, that, ‘Yes, I can. My community cares about me and yes, I can succeed in this community. And look, they’re providing a way.’”<sup>79</sup>

To turn that hope into achievement, Career Pathways prepares its participants to deal with the rigors of its programs and eventually employment through a combination of GED attainment, basic skills training (with a focus on soft skills), and a unique, sector-designed and sector-specific work readiness training, which covers professionalism, interpersonal skills, willingness to learn, integrity, and initiative.<sup>80</sup>



***The GRIC Employment & Training Department holds a Career Pathways career fair in Sacaton, Arizona on September 1, 2015. (Photo: Christopher Lomaquahu/Gila River Indian News)***

Once in their programs, participants engage in work-based learning through work experience placements with tribal employers to prepare them for permanent employment, an expense that is covered in part by supplemental funding from GRIC. CP also requires that its participants take part in community service projects in order to deepen their understanding of and connection to their community and culture.

To raise the awareness of – and secure the buy-in for – Career Pathways among its many stakeholders and the Gila River community at large, the CP staff devised a multifaceted marketing campaign about the initiative and how it works differently and better than what Gila River was doing before. In addition to developing a website, various brochures, and an overview video explaining Career Pathways, the staff also has effectively deployed social media, notably Facebook, which in particular has raised the visibility of and Community members' interest in the certified phlebotomist program. CP also has engaged in targeted outreach, educating Gila River's seven district coordinators and setting up info booths at district community events and GRIC Council meetings. Front and center in this effort are tribal employers. In the Government sector, for example, the chief and staff of the Gila River Fire Department regularly speak at public events and the local high schools. They educate Community members about GRIC's desire to employ more of its own as firefighters and urge them to take advantage of the education and training opportunities available to them to gain accreditation in this area.

In its outreach, CP also decided to develop a youth component to connect high school students to the hospitality industry. Participating tribal employers developed partnerships with the local alternative schools through which they provide regular in-school presentations to educate Gila

River youth about the types of hospitality jobs available through GRIC on and around the reservation.<sup>81</sup> Employers also do on-site mentoring of individual students, and provide interested students the chance to engage in job shadowing at their places of employment to help them better understand the professional workplace and whether that particular line of work is a good fit for them.<sup>82</sup> Finally, CP enables students to get a professional head start by giving them the chance to take an elective credit in career development, which focuses on work readiness and life skills. Students are able to apply this credit towards their high school graduation and also their college degree if they choose to pursue one; in the process, they also obtain a certification in “food borne pathogens” and a “food handlers” card, which are transferable.

## Implementing Career Pathways: Adapting in Real Time

To implement Career Pathways in accordance with its ambitious vision and multi-sector plan, Gila River had to get creative. This was particularly true of funding. The three-year DOL grant provided it with an important financial foundation upon which to build, but the grant by itself was not nearly enough to support the breadth and depth of what Gila River was seeking to accomplish over the long haul. During the design phase, CP’s core team identified the resources it would take to operate effectively, including program development, professional development, operating costs, and supportive services. It then procured the funding it needed through an inventive combination of federal, state, local, and foundation grants, with GRIC filling in the gaps with its own funding where necessary. Meanwhile, the team leveraged advantageous partnerships with employers to defray some of the remaining costs through the contributions of in-kind donations, such as the free use of training facilities and equipment and the pro bono time of employers’ in-house instructors and mentors.

In addition to its fiscal ingenuity, Gila River’s Career Pathways initiative has benefitted greatly from the CP staff’s hands-on approach to assessing and refining the CP system in real time, working in tandem with the sector work groups. Each training program in each sector is evaluated on an ongoing basis based on its accessibility, effectiveness, and cultural synergy, and is then modified accordingly to make it work better.<sup>83</sup> For example, it took three Firefighter Apprentice cohorts before that sector’s team felt it had adequately refined that program’s design.

This approach has proven crucial to GRIC’s ability to overcome the issues it encountered upon implementing CP. The CP team had expected and designed solutions for some issues based on prior experience. But it wasn’t until the initiative’s launch that the CP team learned of the true severity of those issues. Other issues they had not envisioned. For example, staff members were accustomed to the rapid, assembly line style of serving clients through pre-existing programs like WIA. Getting them to embrace CP’s more deliberate approach took some time and ongoing adjustments to transform how they worked individually and collectively.<sup>84</sup> The CP team also didn’t anticipate the time and effort needed to develop a “common language” and mutually acceptable timetables between workforce development practitioners, employers, educators, and others who came together to forge the partnerships necessary to make CP function.<sup>85</sup> Finally, it encountered difficulty in finding academic partners that could “deliver competency-based learning.”<sup>86</sup>

But perhaps the greatest challenge laid bare by CP's implementation was the litany and gravity of obstacles standing in the way of the participants' success. The CP team knew going in, for example, that transportation was an impediment for some, but its early survey of CP participants revealed that more than half (54 percent) needed some form of transportation assistance just to participate in Career Pathways, and then get to and from their jobs once they were hired.<sup>87</sup> A lack of a driver's license compounded the issue for many. Meanwhile, the incoming education levels of CP participants – particularly in math and reading – proved to be lower than originally expected, presenting them a steep climb to meet the demands of CP's rigorous curricula.<sup>88</sup> This was particularly true of the "intense" academics – not to mention the physical demands – of the Firefighter Apprentice training program.<sup>89</sup> Financial and housing hardships, family issues, a lack of "study skills to keep up with accelerated courses," previously undiagnosed learning disabilities, and the length and conventional scheduling of those courses posed additional hindrances.<sup>90</sup>

Seeking to neutralize these obstacles, the CP team continually adapts the initiative's programs with an overarching focus: accommodate participants' personal and academic needs. Whether it be alternative class times, flexible work schedules, or special accommodations for incumbent workers who rely on Career Pathways, Gila River has made a conscious choice to put its people first in order to ensure that CP realizes the Community's vision for an empowered future.

## Factors Driving Success

While only a few years in the making, by all accounts Career Pathways is emerging as a difference-making success story for the Gila River Indian Community. Although the Community's ambitious decision to launch CP across five distinct sectors out of the gates was considered risky by some, "these five sectors have each found a unique pathway to success."<sup>91</sup> As Manuel sees it, the proof is in the numbers: "We've had more individuals get employment and get credentials, and actually feel self-worth. They feel more accomplished."<sup>92</sup> A multitude of factors explain why Career Pathways is already returning dividends to the Community, but the following four factors merit focused discussion, for they offer important, transferable lessons for other tribal nations.

### ***1. Coaching, Mentoring, and Cohort Building***

Observing high attrition rates among participants in the initial rollout of the Career Pathways initiative, the CP team set out to learn why. Its analysis revealed that 68 percent of incoming participants did not possess the academic competencies needed to meet the baseline requirements of the sector training programs they had chosen. In response, Career Pathways developed a new component: "coaching." This intensive approach to case management features CP staff members working closely with participants on a one-on-one basis to develop and implement individualized plans to raise them to the proficiency levels necessary to tackle the academic demands of their programs.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to preparing participants to embark on Career Pathways through coaching, Career Pathways developed a tandem strategy for supporting participants once they are in their academic programs: educational mentoring.<sup>94</sup> Among other things, this strategy includes



supplemental tutoring sessions to help participants not only master the course content, but learn *how* to study.<sup>95</sup> It also features an extraordinary step designed to ensure participants' success: CP staff members actually take the same courses as the participants they are mentoring. This enables the CP team to "get a bird's eye view of what is going on," specifically what is causing failure and keying success.<sup>96</sup>

Just as important as the close support that CP provides individual participants through coaching and mentoring is its effort to create a "small cohort effect" among them as a way of getting them to support one another so that they overcome the personal obstacles they face, stay on track, and complete their particular training program.<sup>97</sup> At the heart of all three related strategies is replacing an expectation of failure with the confidence to succeed.<sup>98</sup>

"We take a humanistic approach to each individual. We meet people where they're at," says James Tree, GRIC Career Pathways Training Specialist. Tree, who serves as an educational mentor for the Firefighter Apprentice program, goes through the Emergency Medical Technician training with CP participants (becoming a certified EMT in the process). "We work with each individual on self-development, and that self-development is not only their skills and ability, but their self-concept as well. You have to be able to deal with and overcome those moments of self-doubt in order to finish what you started. It's about getting them to understand, 'I *can* achieve. I *can* do this.'"<sup>99</sup>

This multi-pronged strategy has made a profound difference, particularly in CP's academically challenging Medical and Firefighter Apprentice programs. For example, the educational mentor was not in place for the first cohort of the Firefighter Apprentice program, and the majority of participants failed. It was instituted for the second cohort, and by the third cohort the success rate was nearing 100 percent.<sup>100</sup>

Career Pathways is growing its stable of educational mentors by enlisting successful program participants to then serve as mentors, connecting current participants with role models who have traveled the professional path they have chosen to follow. Community member Jessica Lewis is one such mentor. She started her journey in 2014 as a participant in the Firefighter Apprentice program. Upon completing the intensive one-year program, she was asked by the CP staff to serve as a mentor to current Firefighter Apprentice program participants who are following in her footsteps. "I pass on to them the advice that was given to me when I was at their level," says Lewis, who credits her service as a mentor with helping her to stay the course by keeping in balance her professional life and her family life, which includes providing care to her quadriplegic father.<sup>101</sup>

"You have to practice what you preach," declares Lewis, who now serves as a Firefighter Apprentice and is preparing to transition to reserve firefighter.<sup>102</sup> Her long-term goal is to become a full-time professional firefighter, and eventually pursue a Fire Science degree.

Career Pathways also has added peer mentors to connect with GRIC youth, showing them that their futures are laden with opportunities – and how they can go about seizing those opportunities. "When I heard about Career Pathways, I thought it was an excellent idea, because

there are a lot of youth that are my age that don't understand that they can become something. They just think, 'I am going to wait until I am 16, and then drop out. It really disappoints me because there are so many kids that have so much potential,'" says Kara Jones, former Career Pathways high school mentor for Gila River's District 1. "Career Pathways is showing youth that if you work hard enough, you can get something out of life."<sup>103</sup>

To institutionalize this strategy across Gila River's governmental operations, the CP team is developing a mentorship manual for administrative, management, and professional staff to use as a guide for engaging in professional development training for incumbent employees.<sup>104</sup>

## ***2. Teaching Their Own at Home***

Relying on outside academic partners to deliver many of the courses for Career Pathways posed other obstacles for participant success: culture and transportation. While CP's affiliated community colleges are located nearby in the greater Phoenix area, their distance from reservation-based participants with no reliable form of transportation made regular class attendance difficult. In addition, their standard curricula did not account for the particular learning styles of GRIC students, nor did they reflect or speak to Gila River culture. This prompted the CP team to rethink where CP participants learn, who they learn from, and what and how they learn.

The resulting solution began with getting the colleges to agree to teach the courses on-site at Gila River. This has proved no simple task. Some of the colleges chafed at consenting to Gila River's governmental jurisdiction, something that the Community's leadership made clear it would not budge on.<sup>105</sup> After much negotiation, Gila River succeeded in forging agreements with the colleges to defer to tribal jurisdiction so that the teaching of courses could proceed on the reservation. However, the colleges' minimum requirement of 12-15 students for courses held in satellite locations presents an ongoing challenge for some of CP's programs with lower enrollment, which has the CP team focused on growing its participant pool to meet the enrollment thresholds.

Next, Career Pathways worked to cultivate teachers for these courses who understand Gila River culture and that CP participants could identify with: their own people. It did so by working with its college partners to certify selected Community members to serve as adjunct faculty with their institutions. For the Small Business sector, CP staff teamed with Chandler-Gilbert Community College (CGCC) to get current Gila River small business owners the credentials necessary to teach CGCC sector-based courses to aspiring entrepreneurs at home on the reservation.<sup>106</sup> Among them is Michael Preston, former Small Business sector chair.

"I thought it was really valuable for them, because it's not somebody coming in from the outside and teaching them, 'Oh, this is how business is,'" says Preston, who owns and operates his own business – the "Kowee Coffee" kiosk located in the Gila River Governance Center – in addition to serving as Youth Coordinator for the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council. "It's like, 'This is how it really was – the good, bad, and ugly of starting a business here in your own community.' It's good for the students to get that firsthand knowledge, plus credit for it."<sup>107</sup>

Gila River has taken additional steps to ensure that Career Pathways delivers “culturally relevant training to our people.”<sup>108</sup> These include:

- infusing cultural values and cultural stories into existing courses<sup>109</sup>;
- developing new courses from a Gila River cultural viewpoint;
- regularly consulting with GRIC’s Council of Elders to ensure that the CP curricula is culturally enriched;
- educating non-Community member faculty about the particular learning styles and challenges of Native learners and Gila River’s culture and lifeways<sup>110</sup>;
- adapting curricula to accommodate participant learning styles and challenges; and
- convening focus groups to learn from CP participants if the curricula provided is hitting the academic and cultural marks, and then refining the curricula accordingly.

### ***3. Closing the Loop through Policy***

Gila River is using policy to maximize its return on the workforce development investments it is making through Career Pathways and related programs. In November 2011, the GRIC Council instituted a new human resources policy that gives automatic hiring priority to WIA participants who complete their training programs and then excel in their work experience placements.<sup>111</sup> When Gila River launched Career Pathways – a WIA-based grant – shortly thereafter, the policy was expanded to cover CP participants who meet the same criteria. Those who do bypass GRIC’s standard screening process for hiring, giving them a bright-line path from their three-month work experience placements to permanent employment working for the Community.<sup>112</sup>

For example, in the Construction sector, CP participants are placed with GRIC’s Building and Maintenance Department. When a participant performs well, the Department’s director can simply write a memo to the Human Resources Department requesting to do a direct hire. When that occurs, the participant’s work experience placement essentially “becomes de facto on-the-job training.”<sup>113</sup> This not only benefits the employees, it benefits tribal employers because they save on the costs associated with advertising open positions and then expending the staff time involved with processing and reviewing applications, conducting interviews, and deciding on the top candidate for the job.

“If they have been successful in their placements,” explains Chanda, “the employer can write a letter to hire them. They don’t have to go through the selection process. So that has been a huge gain and a huge cost savings to the community, because now the training dollars are turning into community members being hired.”<sup>114</sup>

Gila River is planning to further expand this policy by creating Career Pathways internships for Gila River students who are graduating from college. These internships will provide graduates with critical work experience to prepare them for employment by the Community.<sup>115</sup>

### ***4. Staff Committed to Going the Extra Mile***

While the aforementioned factors have played pivotal roles, the success of Career Pathways would not be possible without the unerring commitment of the CP staff to go the extra mile to ensure participants’ success.<sup>116</sup> That commitment began with their willingness to forgo the status

quo way they had been working to develop GRIC’s human capacity and take full ownership in designing from scratch a new and fundamentally different approach to workforce development through Career Pathways.

In terms of implementing the initiative, the coaching, mentoring, and partnership coordinating has required staff to perform additional responsibilities on top of already jam-packed work schedules, but they embraced these new roles because they saw how vital they were to preparing participants to start and complete their training programs. Fulfilling these roles depends on (1) gaining an intimate understanding of the CP participants that they serve and the difficulties and anxieties they will experience at each step in their Career Pathways journey, and (2) being proactive in working with participants to anticipate and then resolve those difficulties and anxieties so that they remain on their respective CP paths.<sup>117</sup> For staff members like Manuel and Tree, it has meant very early mornings and late nights doing everything from assisting with trainings to tutoring individual participants who need that extra bit of help.<sup>118</sup>

***“If you have passion and drive for your people, and you want to see them succeed, you will make it happen. If you care for your people, you are going to do whatever it takes.”***

***– Elisia Manuel, WIOA Outreach Coordinator,  
Gila River Employment & Training Department***

CP’s leadership is working hard to nourish a working culture where this level of commitment is expected of staff – and celebrate staff when they demonstrate this commitment. According to Brown, who in addition to her role as E&T Training Coordinator now serves as the coordinator and case manager for the Fire Sector,

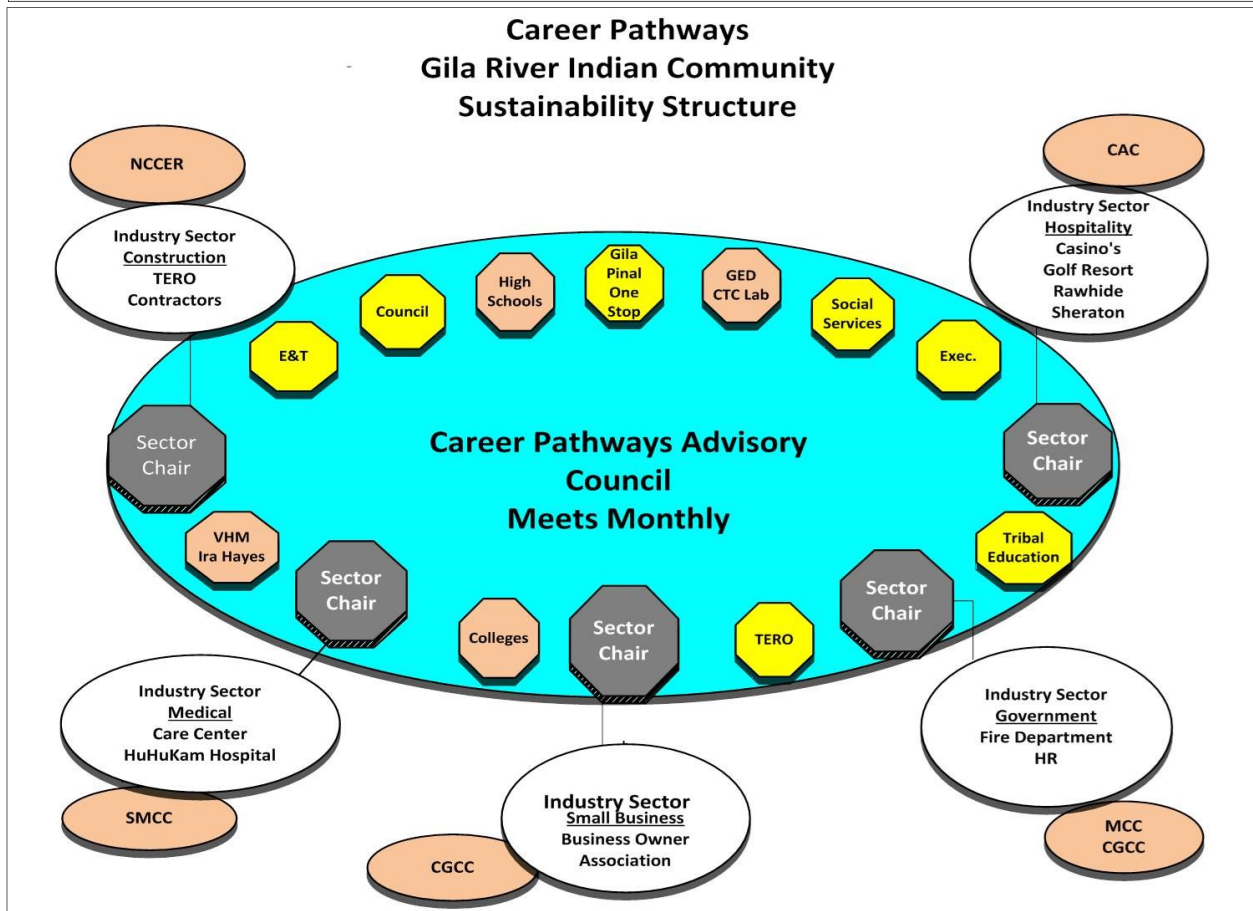
“To be able to do this kind of work – and I can tell you it is a lot of work – to be able to help people in their careers and be successful, you have to have the desire to want to do this kind of work. If you don’t have the desire, just don’t even bother applying, because it doesn’t make sense if you are here simply for a paycheck. It’s all about the dedication you have for the community members. Our staff are mentors, they are leaders. They are very driven, very focused, and willing to go above and beyond.”<sup>119</sup>

### **Growing Its Success**

Although GRIC’s DOL grant for Career Pathways came to an end in March 2016, the Community is well-positioned to build on the success of its rendition of Career Pathways and ensure its long-term sustainability (see Figure 3 on next page). The future of Career Pathways at Gila River looks bright despite some remaining challenges, including:

- transportation, which remains an issue for some CP participants, illuminating the need for the Community to develop a more robust public transit system<sup>120</sup>;

**FIGURE 3: GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY CAREER PATHWAYS SUSTAINABILITY STRUCTURE (COURTESY OF GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING DEPARTMENT)**



- some persisting hesitation by Gila River’s partner colleges to waive their 12-15 student minimum rule to teach courses on-reservation, which may require some new sort of compromise moving forward<sup>121</sup>; and
- the inadequacy of WIOA’s federal BearTracks management information system (MIS) for assessing CP participants’ progress and informing ongoing quality improvement, as BearTracks does not account or measure for: on and off ramps, employer-designed and sanctioned curricula, employer performance and cost-savings, ladders of professional advancement, and the transformative partnerships that the initiative creates (as well as other key CP-specific indicators of success).<sup>122</sup>

Of course, funding also presents an enduring challenge, but GRIC’s leadership, which remains “100 percent” committed to supporting the initiative, has dedicated tribal funding to retain three of the six CP staff members originally hired through the DOL grant to continue their important work.<sup>123</sup>

Also boding well for CP’s long-term viability are Gila River’s efforts to refine the CP system on an ongoing basis – as well as refine policies in ways that solidify and institutionalize Career Pathways across Gila River’s governmental operations.



***The GRIC CP team with the Arizona State University (ASU) evaluation team, August 2013. Pictured left to right: ASU evaluator Ann Maceachron, Melody Lewis, Lynette Clark, Jobs For the Future (JFF) CP Coach Deborah Kobes, GRIC Administrative Support Division Manager Kim Dutcher, DOL Division of Indian & Native American Programs Chief Angie Campbell, Lana Chanda, JFF administrator Geri Scott, ASU consultant and GRIC Community member Gleebah Enos, ASU evaluator Chris Sharp, and GRIC WIA Coordinator Kristina Tisi. (Photo: Mikhail Sundust/Gila River Indian News)***

For example, as Career Pathways took root across its five sectors, CP staff decided to expand the size of the initiative's Advisory Committee beyond its original 10 members to provide new key players a say at the decision-making table.<sup>124</sup> Career Pathways also treats each incoming cohort in each sector as an opportunity to enhance that sector's curriculum and participants' ability to master it. As Chanda explains, "We perfect it with each new cohort."<sup>125</sup> In addition, the CP team is partnering with GRIC's MIS Department to develop a government-wide system to track the educational and professional advancement of all current and former CP participants, which among other things will enhance Gila River's ability to provide transition services to those leaving and re-entering CP programs.<sup>126</sup> On the policy front, Gila River's E&T Department is revamping its WIOA policies and case management approach to integrate proven Career Pathways strategies into its operation of the WIOA program.<sup>127</sup>

Equally relevant are CP's deepening partnerships between governmental departments and programs, tribal employers, educational institutions, and other key players – as well as their unified embrace of the new way of doing business that they have helped to create (see Figure 3 on previous page).<sup>128</sup> The steadfast commitment of CP's partners to the process enables the individual sectors to run more seamlessly and efficiently with each new crop of participants, and also empowers the initiative's contributors to "strengthen and expand on what we've already developed."<sup>129</sup>

Gila River is already working to expand Career Pathways by introducing formal post-program apprenticeships within GRIC government to provide CP participants with bridge opportunities in advance of permanent employment, a first for the Community. The CP team is starting with apprenticeships in the Construction sector (in part to make the sector more attractive to prospective applicants), and GRIC's Wildland Fire Archaeology Program has stepped in to create apprentice positions for successful CP participants when permanent firefighter position openings aren't immediately available with the Community.<sup>130</sup>

Gila River also has plans in the works to branch out into additional sectors. The CP team is building a partnership with the Gila River Police Department to create a CP sector for law enforcement, and it is exploring – in response to Community member demands – future sectors in the fields of agriculture, education, engineering, hydrology, and management.<sup>131</sup> According to Chanda, “We are well on our way to developing a skilled workforce that fulfills the specific needs of the employers in our Community. It is such an exciting venture for GRIC, one that will give hope to our youth and jobs to our Community members.”<sup>132</sup>

Altogether, Gila River's role as a Career Pathways pioneer in and for Indian Country has produced “systemic innovations that other Indian and Native American communities can adopt and replicate,” and affirms that multiple CP sectors can simultaneously “be developed in tribal settings.”<sup>133</sup> Committed to sharing the lessons it has learned, the CP team is developing a toolkit for other tribal nations to use as they design their own versions of Career Pathways suited to their needs and community priorities.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016. The Gila River Indian Community's (GRIC) inclusion in NCAI's workforce development project was contingent upon the formal approval of GRIC leadership. In addition, this “Innovation Spotlight” case study was reviewed and formally approved by GRIC prior to publication.

<sup>2</sup> The Akimel O'otham (“river people”) were once called the “Pimas,” a name accorded them by the Spanish. Meanwhile, the Pee Posh (alternatively Piipaash, meaning “the people”) also were known as “Maricopas.” Sometime between the mid-1700s and the 1840s, the latter group migrated from the southern Colorado River to central Arizona and co-mingled with the Akimel O'otham, who taught them their time-honored irrigation-based agricultural practices (Tiller 2015, p. 215). The Community's website provides a detailed history (see: <http://www.gilariver.org/index.php/about/history>, accessed December 8, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The GRIC Enrollment Department provided an official count of 21,814 certified enrolled members as of December 2016 (communication with NCAI, December 12, 2016); GRIC website (<http://www.gilariver.org/index.php/about/history>, accessed December 8, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> The reservation was established in 1859, and the United States Congress formally acknowledged Gila River as a federally recognized tribe in 1939.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Community, this development fostered deep poverty as well as the emergence of high rates of alcoholism and diabetes among the Gila River people, issues that still plague their descendants to this day (Ibid., accessed December 8, 2016). In fact, a considerable body of research identifies the Gila River Indian Community as having the “highest rate of diabetes in the world” (Brown 2009, p. 1).

<sup>6</sup> GRIC website (<http://www.gilariver.org/index.php/about/history>, accessed December 20, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Tiller 2015, p. 215; ASU, June 2016, p. 5; GRIC website (<http://www.gilariver.org/index.php/enterprises>, accessed December 20, 2016). The Community continues to work to further expand and diversify “its industrial, agricultural, retail and recreational economic base” (Inter Tribal Council of Arizona 2016).

<sup>8</sup> The act, which became enforceable in 2008, restores 653,500 acre-feet of water annually to the Community (Brown 2009, p. 8). In addition to Gila River Farms, independent farming operations currently cultivate 22,000 acres of crops

on the reservation (Tiller 2015, p. 215). According to the Community, plans are in motion to develop a massive irrigation project that will deliver to 146,300 acres of land, which will nearly quadruple the Community's agricultural base (<http://www.gilariver.org/index.php/about/history>, accessed December 20, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> To learn more about the Gila River Health Care Corporation, see: <http://grhc.org/> (accessed December 20, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Tiller 2015, p. 215. Meanwhile, the Gila River Police Department won a Harvard Honoring Nations award in 2003 (to read the Honoring Nation case study, see: <https://hpaied.org/sites/default/files/publications/Assuring%20Self%20Determination%20through%20an%20Effective%20Law%20Enforcement%20Program.pdf>, accessed December 20, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Figures provided by Gila River Indian Community, September 9, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Lynette Clark, Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Community Research, Evaluation & Development, 2016, pp. 29-30 (citing U.S. Census Bureau and American Community Survey data).

<sup>14</sup> Gila River Indian Community, email correspondence, September 25, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Lana Chanda, "Career Pathways System" PowerPoint, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Banham, May 11, 2011 (Social Policy Research Associates 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, October 21, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Chanda, "Career Pathways System" PowerPoint, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Chanda, "Gila River Indian Community," October 21, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, August 17, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Chandra Larsen, "Career Pathways – A National Model" PowerPoint, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Inter Tribal Council of Arizona 2016.

<sup>24</sup> E&T's mission is "to assist youth and adults facing serious barriers to employment by providing job training and other supportive services that will result in one's increased ability to retain employment; thereby, becoming contributing members of the family and their community." For more on the suite of services it provides, see: <http://www.gilariver.org/index.php/departments--programs/administrative-support> (accessed December 21, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) was replaced by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) on July 22, 2014. While many longtime workforce development practitioners use the two acronyms interchangeably, WIOA features a much heavier emphasis on education in addition to employment, and WIOA's performance standards are closely aligned with those of Career Pathways.

<sup>26</sup> Chanda, "Gila River Indian Community Career Pathways Project" PowerPoint, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Sundust 2012, p. 6; Sundust 2013, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> In announcing the grant to Gila River, then-U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis stated it was "an opportunity for the Gila River Indian Community to develop practices and programs that could serve as a model for the nation and is one more step to expanding the pool of workforce development programs available to Indian and Native American communities" (ICMN Staff, June 14, 2012). The Tucson Indian Center also was awarded a Career Pathways grant at the same time as Gila River.

<sup>29</sup> Sundust 2013, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Chanda, "Sector Strategies/Career Pathways" PowerPoint, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Social Policy Research Associates 2011. The Advisory Committee first met weekly, then bi-weekly, and finally monthly once the individual sector teams were developed and began doing their work. The chair of each sector team is that sector's representative on the Advisory Committee.

<sup>32</sup> Sundust 2012, p. 6. The Office of American Indian Projects at Arizona State University's School of Social Work was chosen to serve as the evaluator (see ASU 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Elisia Manuel, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Social Policy Research Associates 2011.

<sup>35</sup> ASU, June 2016, pp. 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> Manuel, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Sundust 2014, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> As Chanda explains, "It's called wrap-around services. It can be transportation, it could be childcare, it could be they need a one-month electric bill paid to continue with their classes. But it's also that support group, it's also reaching out to the families, tying that in, creating that employer network, creating that wrapped-around support" (Interview with NCAI, October 21, 2015). Arizona's Dislocated Worker Program provides services at E&T's One-Stop Center in



conjunction with Gila River's involvement in the state-wide WIOA Nineteen Tribal Nations Workforce Development Board.

<sup>39</sup> Chanda, "Gila River Indian Community," October 21, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> ASU, June 2016, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Social Policy Research Associates 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, October 21, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Workforce Innovation Fund, "WIF Grantee Summary," March 12, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> ASU, June 2016, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Sundust 2013, p. 8; Chanda, "Sector Strategies/Career Pathways" PowerPoint, 2016. According to the evaluation of Gila River's CP initiative, "Tribal programs that adopt the Career Pathways model should prioritize the sectors within their own economic context and within the existing workforce and emerging labor markets, while recognizing and planning for the complexity of the process. GRIC seized the opportunity to develop sectors that aligned with previous efforts and pre-existing economic development initiatives" (ASU, June 2016, p. 17).

<sup>46</sup> Workforce Innovation Fund, March 12, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> For a visual overview of this sector, see: [http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce\\_development\\_gric\\_4.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce_development_gric_4.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Interview with NCAI, August 17, 2016. Chanda explains that "if you look across the nation, usually TERO sits by itself. Tribes can benefit by developing a strong relationship between WIOA and TERO" (Ibid.). The sector also targets Community members incarcerated at the reservation's adult detention facility, providing them work skills, life skills, and industry-specific training so that they can be hired by local construction contractors upon their release (Chanda, "Gila River Indian Community," October 21, 2015).

<sup>49</sup> For an overview of this sector, see: [http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce\\_development\\_gric\\_9.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce_development_gric_9.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, October 21, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> ASU, June 2016, p. 48.

<sup>52</sup> For more on this particular aspect of the Career Pathways Hospitality sector, see: [http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce\\_development\\_gric\\_5.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce_development_gric_5.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> For more on this particular aspect of the Career Pathways Hospitality sector, see [http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce\\_development\\_gric\\_6.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce_development_gric_6.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, October 21, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> For more on CP's Medical Sector, see: [http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce\\_development\\_gric\\_7.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce_development_gric_7.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Gregory Mendoza, Former Governor, Gila River Indian Community (Sundust 2014, p. 4).

<sup>57</sup> Gila River Indian Community (GRIC), *Workforce Innovation Fund WIF Wrap-Up Report*, June 30, 2016, p. 1; Manuel, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016. CP has trained its focus on supporting Community members to venture into commercial agriculture, with an eye towards capitalizing on the Community's water rights settlement.

<sup>58</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, October 21, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Sundust 2014, p. 4. For more on Gila River's "Entrepreneurship Pathway," see: [http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce\\_development\\_gric\\_8.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce_development_gric_8.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> According to Preston, the objective is to prepare participants to "follow this path and create your own job" (Interview with NCAI, September 7, 2016).

<sup>61</sup> For a complete list of each sector's fundamental responsibilities, see: [http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce\\_development\\_gric\\_11.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce_development_gric_11.pdf). According to Arizona State University, "Essentially the GRIC Career Pathways project was a demonstration of five separate workforce projects...Each of these sectors worked independently of each other within the Career Pathways framework to develop pathways that fit industry partner needs while leveraging ongoing, intensive support from the Career Pathways staff" (ASU, June 2016, p. 17).

<sup>62</sup> Chanda, "Gila River Indian Community," October 21, 2015; Chanda, Interview with NCAI, August 17, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Chanda, "Gila River Indian Community," October 21, 2015. According to Chanda, "We asked the industry sectors what their needs were, and then we let them take it from there. So what they're doing is they are actually creating, designing their own system. Each industry sector is a system, and each chair of that sector is responsible for convening and getting the community college to the table and telling them what they want" (Ibid.).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. The evaluation of the initiative determined that "GRIC Career Pathways developed a thorough understanding of the partners' organizational structures, including governing boards and other administrative structures, in order to obtain approvals and other administrative concurrence" (ASU, June 2016, p. 18).

<sup>65</sup> For example, GRIC forged a partnership with Gila/Pinal County OneStop, which now serves on CP's core team.

<sup>66</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, October 21, 2015. The Nineteen Tribal Nations Workforce Development Board meets

quarterly to discuss shared tribal issues involving training and employment. The State of Arizona is the only state that has a Workforce Development Board composed exclusively of tribes. Lessons that Gila River learns from its Career Pathways initiative are shared with all of the participating Arizona tribes through this board. To learn more about the Nineteen Tribal Nations Workforce Development Area, see <http://azntn.org/> (accessed April 26, 2017).

<sup>67</sup> ASU, June 2016, p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> Social Policy Research Associates 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Sundust 2012, p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> According to Chanda, “CP closes the loop, ensuring a return on the tribe’s investment. With WIA [the Workforce Investment Act], we just presumed to know what employers wanted. But we didn’t have the relationships with them to be certain. Now we do.” (Interview with NCAI, August 17, 2016).

<sup>71</sup> In comparing Gila River’s previous approach with CP, Chanda explains, “You always need to ask the employers first – even within your HR, even within any tribal enterprise – ask them, ‘What do they need?’ Because [previously] in hospitality, our Education Department was sending people off to Cordon Bleu and all these places and what we learned from our community, our hospitality industry was that they don’t want them to be trained by anyone but themselves. They will still start out as a dishwasher. So they’re disillusioned. They go off to school, a lot of money’s been spent on them and they come back and they’re starting as a dishwasher. But hospitality in particular would like to train them themselves” (“Gila River Indian Community,” October 21, 2015).

<sup>72</sup> Sundust 2013, p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with NCAI, September 7, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Workforce Innovation Fund, March 12, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Chanda, “Sector Strategies/Career Pathways” PowerPoint, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Participants also are given credit for prior learning and employment so that they do not need to start from scratch if they have relevant education, training, certifications, and experience already under their belts.

<sup>78</sup> In the future, GRIC hopes to introduce a separate entry program for elementary schools as well.

<sup>79</sup> Chanda, “Gila River Indian Community,” October 21, 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Chanda, “Sector Strategies/Career Pathways” PowerPoint, 2016. For example, CP’s Hospitality sector requires participants to complete a two-week “School of Employment” program and a Basic Skills Training, and offers GED services to those who still need to complete their GED. For more, see: [http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce\\_development\\_gric\\_5.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce_development_gric_5.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> ASU, June 2016, 5.

<sup>82</sup> Workforce Innovation Fund, March 12, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Manuel, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Clark, Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Chanda, “Sector Strategies/Career Pathways” PowerPoint, 2016.

<sup>86</sup> GRIC, *WIF Wrap-up Report*, June 30, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> ASU, June 2016, p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Manuel, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016. At the outset, 68 percent of Career Pathways clients had to rely on coaching to raise themselves up to the academic levels set for the sectors.

<sup>89</sup> Chanda, “Gila River Indian Community,” October 21, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> James Tree, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> ASU, June 2016, p. 16. The evaluation of CP further explains “that success can be defined in many ways: through on-the-job training, through merging longer-term academic requirements with on-the-job training, having primary emphasis on academic outcomes, and developing training competencies specific to industry needs” (Ibid., p. 20).

<sup>92</sup> Manuel, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016.

<sup>93</sup> GRIC, *WIF Wrap-up Report*, June 30, 2016, p. 2. The evaluation of Career Pathways cites “coaching to reach unique sector guidelines for basic academic competencies (especially mathematics)” as a “main predictor” of completing Career Pathways and gaining employment (ASU, June 2016, p. 16). According to Clark, “We buckled down on the content that needed to be covered, and pre- and post-testing to ensure that students were getting what they needed. We could see huge differences in clients between the start and six months later in improving reading and math proficiency, but also character development beyond that of a client under WIOA” (Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016).

<sup>94</sup> As Brown explains, “Career Pathways created a support system, such as developing mentors for each sector,

whereas with WIOA, we have to serve on an annual basis at least 120 participants per program year, meaning the one-on-one is not where we'd like to see it. Meanwhile, Career Pathways, when they came in, they had staff members on board that were able to provide that one-one-one assistance" (Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016).

<sup>95</sup> Clark, Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, August 17, 2016. CP has focused its mentoring efforts in the two sectors — Medical and Government (Firefighter Apprentice) — where CP participants typically experience the greatest difficulty.

<sup>97</sup> Clark, Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016. According to Arizona State University, coaching has contributed to "a sense of group cohesion, encouragement, and fostered self-confidence as the participants were able to experience advancement" (ASU, June 2016, p. 19).

<sup>98</sup> GRIC, *WIF Wrap-up Report*, June 30, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016. CP also has integrated mechanisms — such as award ceremonies — to recognize and honor participants' achievements. As Manuel explains, "If they see that we are excited for them, they are going to push even harder" (Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016).

<sup>100</sup> GRIC, *WIF Wrap-up Report*, June 30, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with NCAI, August 29, 2016.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Social Policy Research Associates 2011.

<sup>104</sup> GRIC, *WIF Wrap-up Report*, June 30, 2016, p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, August 17, 2016. According to Clark, "We had to balance workforce development with the community's needs. It wasn't easy. We had to turn down institutions because they didn't want to do what we needed" (Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016).

<sup>106</sup> The sector's coursework "is presented in a context that is tailored to fit the needs and sensibilities of business-owners and entrepreneurs on the Gila River Indian Reservation" (Sundust 2014, p. 4). It should be noted that CP partnered with CGCC after its initial partner for the sector, Central Arizona College, would not consent to GRIC's jurisdiction in teaching courses on-reservation (Preston, Interview with NCAI, September 7, 2016).

<sup>107</sup> Preston, Interview with NCAI, September 7, 2016.

<sup>108</sup> Lana Chanda, Social Policy Research Associates 2011.

<sup>109</sup> Chanda, "Gila River Indian Community," October 21, 2015.

<sup>110</sup> According to Clark, CP participants "need to see themselves in those that teach them, or at least an understanding from [the teachers] of who they are and what they value" (Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016).

<sup>111</sup> GRIC, *Employee Policies and Procedures Reference Guide*, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> Manuel, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016. Even without a formal policy in place, Gila River's enterprises have adopted the same practice, seeking a return on the investments they have made in the design of the training programs and those who have successfully completed those programs.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Chanda, "Gila River Indian Community," October 21, 2015.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> As the evaluation of CP explains, staff "demonstrated an ability to adjust to the needs of their participants. Sector leaders acknowledged the importance of the Career Pathways staff to facilitate the advancement toward sector goals. Career Pathways staff were seen as available and served in the role of conveners by bridging any communication gaps that may have existed between industry partners, education providers, and GRIC E&T" (ASU, June 2016, p. 20).

<sup>117</sup> Clark, Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016.

<sup>118</sup> According to Manuel, "If you show that our key people are there doing exactly what the students are doing, the students are going to want to do it even more and push forward" (Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016).

<sup>119</sup> Interview with NCAI, June 22, 2016.

<sup>120</sup> ASU, June 2016, p. 13.

<sup>121</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, August 17, 2016; GRIC, *WIF Wrap-up Report*, June 30, 2016, p. 13.

<sup>122</sup> Chanda, "Sector Strategies/Career Pathways" PowerPoint, 2016. The formal evaluation of Career Pathways concluded that "new systems should be developed at the federal level or resources should be provided to tribal programs to develop systems that meet [tribes' Career Pathway] needs" (ASU, June 2016, p. 19).

<sup>123</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, October 21, 2015. According to ASU, "From the beginning of the project, the elected GRIC Council demonstrated support for system-change, in order to meet the needs of the community members" (June 2016, p. 17).

<sup>124</sup> Chanda, Interview with NCAI, August 17, 2016.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Chanda, "Sector Strategies/Career Pathways" PowerPoint, 2016.

<sup>127</sup> Manuel, Interview with NCAI, June 13, 2016.

<sup>128</sup> Chanda, "Sector Strategies/Career Pathways" PowerPoint, 2016; GRIC, *WIF Wrap-up Report*, June 30, 2016, p. 3.

<sup>129</sup> GRIC, *WIF Wrap-up Report*, June 30, 2016, p. 5. As an example, Chanda recently joined the board of the Gila/Pinal Workforce Investment Area.

<sup>130</sup> This offers "a great 'off ramp' for those awaiting permanent positions as a Gila River Firefighter and continues their knowledge in firefighting. This connection would not have happened if Career Pathways wasn't already involved in the Fire Program" (Ibid., p. 4).

<sup>131</sup> Chanda, "Sector Strategies/Career Pathways" PowerPoint, 2016.

<sup>132</sup> Chanda, email correspondence, January 15, 2015.

<sup>133</sup> Workforce Innovation Fund, "WIF Grantee Summary," March 12, 2013; ASU, June 2016, p. 14.

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This Innovation Spotlight was the fourth of four case studies that PTG developed and shared in conjunction with this project. All four case studies also were highlighted in PTG's workforce development toolkit for tribal leaders and workforce development practitioners, which was released in 2018.

This Spotlight was developed by Ian Record (Director, NCAI Partnership for Tribal Governance) and Joel Chastain (Former Wilma Mankiller Fellow, NCAI).

To learn more about the PTG's project on tribal workforce development, please visit [www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development](http://www.ncai.org/ptg/workforce-development).

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