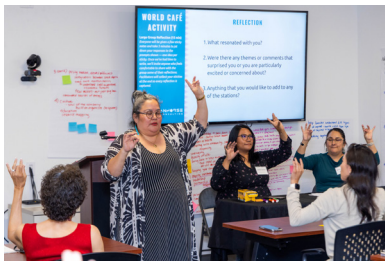
SCALING WORK WITH INDIGENOUS ENTREPRENEURS

World Café - Discovery Report

OVERVIEW

On March 31, 2026, key stakeholders within New Mexico's Indigenous Entrepreneurial Ecosystem convened to reflect on the New Mexico Tribal Entrepreneurship Enhancement Program (NMTEEP) and ways in which similar efforts can be built and scaled to support Indigenous entrepreneurs throughout New Mexico. This report synthesizes key insights from community-driven World Café sessions and broader ecosystem analysis of the NMTEEP. The findings reveal a consistent and critical insight: Indigenous entrepreneurship is fundamentally relational, community-centered, and culturally grounded—not transactional, individualistic, or purely profit-driven.

To achieve meaningful and sustainable impact, there must be a shift from isolated program delivery to intentional ecosystem design rooted in Indigenous values, long-term relationships, and community wellbeing.



CORE INSIGHT

Entrepreneurship in Indigenous communities operates as a relational and cultural system.

- ◊ Success is driven by trust, relationships, and community accountability
- ◊ Businesses are embedded within family, culture, and local economies
- ◊ Economic activity is inseparable from identity, healing, and sovereignty

Implication: *Traditional Western models of entrepreneurship and program design are structurally misaligned with Indigenous realities.*

KEY FINDINGS

1. Relationships Are the Foundation

Trust-building is essential and often requires significant time investment. Programs are most effective when they prioritize peer relationships, mentorship, and community presence over transactional service delivery.

What Works:

- ◊ Success is driven by trust, relationships, and community accountability
- ◊ Businesses are embedded within family, culture, and local economies
- ◊ Economic activity is inseparable from identity, healing, and sovereignty

What Doesn't:

- ◊ Rigid institutional structures and extractive data practices
- ◊ Short-term program timelines that do not allow trust to develop

Implication: *Invest in long-term relational infrastructure rather than short-term outputs.*

2. Entrepreneurship Is Community-Centered

Entrepreneurs operate within interconnected systems of family, culture, and community responsibility. Profit is not the sole motivator—community impact and cultural continuity are equally important.

System Misalignment:

- ◊ Mainstream programs misunderstand rural and tribal realities
- ◊ Western timelines, metrics, and expectations do not align with Indigenous contexts

Implication: *Shift from founder-first models to community-centered frameworks and redefine success accordingly.*

3. Capital Systems Are a Primary Barrier

One of the most significant barriers identified is the misalignment between traditional financial systems and the realities of Indigenous entrepreneurs. Conventional lending practices often rely on credit history, collateral, and rigid underwriting criteria that do not reflect tribal economic structures or lived experiences.

This results in limited access to funding, increased mistrust of financial institutions, and a lack of appropriate capital at different stages of business growth. Entrepreneurs emphasized the need for flexible, relationship-based funding models that invest in the individual as much as the business itself.

Barriers Include:

- ◊ Misaligned lending criteria and underwriting models
- ◊ Lack of trust in financial institutions
- ◊ Limited access to credit and collateral

Needed Solutions:

- ◊ Flexible, relationship-based capital
- ◊ Stage-appropriate and right-sized funding
- ◊ Investment in the entrepreneur, not just the business

Implication: *Develop Indigenous-aligned capital systems and blended financing models.*

4. Entrepreneurship Is Holistic (Identity + Healing)

Entrepreneurship involves emotional, cultural, and psychological dimensions.

Challenges:

- ◊ Isolation, impostor syndrome, and pressure from multiple roles
- ◊ Navigating cultural identity alongside business development

Missing Supports:

- ◊ Mental health resources
- ◊ Identity-affirming and community-based spaces

Implication: *Integrate holistic support systems into program and ecosystem design.*

5. Success Must Be Redefined

A critical finding across all discussions is that success must be redefined beyond traditional financial metrics. While revenue and business growth are important, they are not the primary indicators of success within Indigenous communities.

Instead, success is measured through community impact, cultural continuity, personal growth, and overall wellbeing. Indicators include increased confidence, stronger community connections, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and improved quality of life.

This broader definition of success requires new evaluation frameworks that capture relational and cultural outcomes, rather than relying solely on quantitative economic indicators.

Key Indicators:

- ◊ Community impact, well-being and economic resilience
- ◊ Cultural continuity and pride
- ◊ Confidence, leadership, and self-belief
- ◊ Intergenerational wealth and knowledge transfer
- ◊ Strengthened local economies

Implication: *Develop new evaluation frameworks centered on relational, cultural, and community outcomes.*

6. Infrastructure Gaps Limit Growth

There is a widespread lack of accessible infrastructure to support entrepreneurship in tribal and rural communities. This includes limited access to business services such as accounting, legal support, and technical assistance, as well as a lack of physical spaces like incubators, maker-spaces, and community hubs.

Entrepreneurs are often building businesses without the foundational systems that are typically available in more resourced environments. This significantly slows growth and increases the burden on individuals.

Missing Infrastructure:

- ◊ Local access to services in rural and tribal areas
- ◊ Business support services (accounting, legal, technical)
- ◊ Incubators, maker-spaces, and workforce development systems
- ◊ Co-creating a policy strategy and mechanism that aligns with Indian Affairs Department and Small Business Office

Implication: *Invest in both physical and digital infrastructure to support ecosystem growth. Invest in stipends or programming to support entrepreneurs with necessary services.*

7. Ecosystem Design Is Essential

A recurring theme throughout the findings is that programs alone are insufficient to support long-term entrepreneurial success. What is needed is a coordinated ecosystem that connects resources, people, and institutions in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Effective ecosystems are built on relationships, trust, and collaboration. They require clear roles, strong communication, and shared goals among stakeholders. Liaisons play a critical role as connectors within this system, helping to bridge gaps between entrepreneurs and resources.

Importantly, ecosystem design must be intentional. Without coordination, efforts become fragmented, and opportunities for impact are lost.

What Works:

- ◊ Cross-organizational collaboration
- ◊ Referral networks and relationship-based support

Challenges

- ◊ Unclear roles, fragmented communication, and lack of coordination
- ◊ Need for consistent funding and investment into the ecosystem for Indigenous entrepreneurs

Implication: *Build intentional ecosystem architecture with defined roles, aligned partners, and shared resources.*

8. Culture Is the Methodology

Cultural knowledge systems are central to how entrepreneurship is learned and practiced. Cultural knowledge and practices are not supplementary—they are central to how entrepreneurship is learned and sustained. Storytelling, apprenticeship, intergenerational learning, and experiential education are all critical components of Indigenous entrepreneurial development.

Programs that fail to integrate these elements risk being ineffective or misaligned with community needs. Conversely, those that center culture create stronger engagement, deeper learning, and more sustainable outcomes.

Core Elements:

- ◊ Storytelling and lived experience
- ◊ Apprenticeship and intergenerational learning
- ◊ Learning by doing

Implication: *Design programs as cultural learning systems, not Western models with surface-level adaptation.*

9. Scale Through Networks, Not Replication

Scaling should preserve local context while expanding access through networks. Many Indigenous entrepreneurs operate in rural or reservation-based communities where access to networks, mentorship, and markets is limited. Geographic distance compounds existing systemic inequities, including underinvestment, lack of institutional support, and ongoing impacts of colonial systems.

This isolation reinforces the need for localized support structures that are both accessible and culturally relevant.

Scale What Works:

- ◊ Liaison and mentorship models
- ◊ Relational support systems

Keep Local:

- ◊ Culture, relationships, and community context

Implication: *Build distributed, networked ecosystems rather than standardized program replication.*

10. Long-Term Sustainability Requires Sovereignty

Sustainable success requires a shift toward Indigenous ownership and control of economic systems. This includes developing tribal investment strategies, creating Indigenous-controlled capital systems, and reducing reliance on external funding sources such as federal grants.

Looking ahead, the vision for the next 10 years includes the development of self-sustaining entrepreneurial ecosystems that are locally rooted and community driven. These ecosystems would feature strong infrastructure, intergenerational leadership, and coordinated networks of support.

Scaling should occur through networks rather than replication. While models such as mentorship and liaison roles can be expanded, they must remain adaptable to local cultural and community contexts.

A sustainable future includes:

- ◊ Indigenous-owned and operated entrepreneurial ecosystems
- ◊ Tribal investment and internal funding mechanisms
- ◊ Intergenerational leadership and knowledge transfer
- ◊ Coordinated, community-driven ecosystem infrastructure

Key Priorities:

- ◊ Tribal investment and leadership
- ◊ Reduced reliance on federal funding
- ◊ Indigenous-controlled capital systems and funding mechanisms

Implication: *Shift toward self-sustaining, sovereign ecosystems.*

Program Insights - New Mexico Tribal Entrepreneurship Enhancement Program (NMTEEP) Model

STRENGTHS

Participants consistently highlighted several strengths of the NMTEEP program design. Community-based outreach was particularly effective, as it reduced barriers by bringing resources directly to entrepreneurs rather than requiring travel.

Relational mentorship and peer-to-peer learning were also highly valued. These approaches created spaces for shared experiences, storytelling, and practical knowledge exchange, which built trust and confidence among participants.

The flexibility of the program allowed liaisons to tailor their approach to local contexts, making engagement more authentic and effective. Cross-organizational collaboration also helped expand access to resources and opportunities. Key strengths included:

- Community-based outreach increased accessibility
- Strong relational mentorship and networking
- Flexible program design built trust and engagement
- Peer learning and storytelling were highly effective
- Cross-organizational collaboration expanded opportunities

CHALLENGES

Despite the program model strengths, several challenges were identified. There was notable confusion around roles, responsibilities, and communication across partners. This lack of clarity sometimes led to inefficiencies and frustration.

Institutional structures, including grant requirements and administrative processes, were perceived as rigid and, at times, extractive. Early-stage data collection efforts were also seen as premature, particularly when trust had not yet been established.

Additionally, inconsistent tools and support for liaisons limited their ability to operate effectively across different communities. Key challenges included:

- Confusion around roles, communication, and branding
- Perceptions of institutional rigidity or extractiveness
- Complex grant structures limiting flexibility
- Inconsistent tools and support for liaisons

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT AND EXPANSION

To strengthen the program, participants suggested improving communication pathways, clarifying roles, and enhancing branding and outreach materials. There is also a need to expand access to funding, provide more structured tools and resources for liaisons, and integrate cultural mentorship models more intentionally into program design.

- Clarify roles, communication pathways, and program identity
- Strengthen referral systems and marketing materials
- Expand access to funding and long-term support
- Introduce specialized tools, tracks, and resources for liaisons
- Deepen integration of cultural mentorship models

Calls to Action

INVESTORS

- ◊ Support long-term, trust-based engagement with Indigenous entrepreneurs by funding mentorship, liaison roles, peer networks, and ecosystem coordination—not only individual businesses.
- ◊ Create flexible financing models that move beyond traditional collateral and credit requirements. Prioritize relationship-based lending, revenue-based financing, micro-grants, and blended capital approaches that align with tribal and rural economic contexts.
- ◊ Invest in the foundational systems Indigenous entrepreneurs need to thrive, including:
    - Local incubators and maker-spaces
    - Technical assistance and business services
    - Broadband and digital access
    - Community-based entrepreneurial hubs
- ◊ Shift decision-making power and resources toward Indigenous-led organizations, tribal investment strategies, and community-controlled capital systems that build long-term sovereignty and self-sufficiency.
- ◊ Adopt evaluation frameworks that value community wellbeing, cultural continuity, intergenerational impact, and local resilience alongside financial returns.

POLICY MAKERS

- ◊ Redesign systems around Indigenous contexts
- ◊ Increase flexible, long-term funding for liaison/navigator programming/roles
- ◊ Provide sustained investments that allow trust-building and ecosystem development over time rather than relying on short-term grant cycles and restrictive reporting structures.
- ◊ Support the development of Indigenous-controlled financial institutions, tribal loan funds, community development financial institutions (CDFIs), and alternative underwriting models.
- ◊ Prioritize investments in:
    - Liaison/Navigator Roles
    - Broadband access
    - Transportation
    - Workforce development
    - Entrepreneurial support services
    - Community innovation spaces
- ◊ Ensure Indigenous entrepreneurs, tribal leaders, and community organizations have meaningful leadership roles in economic development planning, policy design, and resource allocation.
- ◊ Advance policies that strengthen tribal self-determination, Indigenous ownership, and locally controlled economic systems that build long-term resilience and generational wealth.
- ◊ Leverage national efforts, like Right to Start, and the work to align with NM Indian Affairs and Economic Development Departments.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- ◊ Commit to buying locally, promoting Indigenous entrepreneurs, and strengthening community wealth through intentional purchasing and referrals.
- ◊ Preserve and pass on cultural teachings, storytelling, craftsmanship, and entrepreneurial wisdom through mentorship, apprenticeship, and community learning spaces.
- ◊ Create stronger connections among entrepreneurs, artists, cultural practitioners, educators, and tribal leaders to reduce isolation and strengthen collective growth.
- ◊ Recognize that entrepreneurship involves emotional, cultural, and personal healing. Encourage spaces that support mental wellness, identity affirmation, and community care.
- ◊ Engage in local entrepreneurship initiatives, community planning efforts, and collaborative networks that strengthen Indigenous economic futures from within the community.
- ◊ Share this discovery document with leaders in your community and network.

COLLECTIVE CALL TO ACTION

Building thriving Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystems requires a shared commitment to relationships, culture, sovereignty, and long-term investment. The opportunity before us is not simply to improve existing programs, but to co-create a new model of entrepreneurship—one rooted in Indigenous values, community wellbeing, and sustainable economic futures for generations to come.

Conclusion

The insights presented in this report make it clear that supporting Indigenous entrepreneurship requires a fundamentally different approach than traditional models provide. Incremental improvements to existing systems will not be sufficient.

Instead, there must be a shift toward ecosystem-based design that centers relationships, culture, and community. By investing in relational infrastructure, culturally aligned capital, and Indigenous-led systems, NMTEEP and its partners can foster long-term, sustainable economic development that is rooted in sovereignty and self-determination.

The deep groundwork has already been laid. Across the state, an established network of organizations and leaders have spent years building and nurturing this entrepreneurial ecosystem. These leaders are ready to activate and accelerate the critical insights and learnings captured in this report. By scaling these models across the state, we can develop, deepen, and sustain opportunities that directly serve our communities and honor the uniquely rich cultural landscape that is New Mexico.

This is not simply an opportunity to improve a program—it is an opportunity to activate a statewide network and build a new model for entrepreneurship that reflects and honors Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and building.

Acknowledgments

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