

The First Annual Tribal College and University (TCU) Native Languages Conference was held on March 24-25, 2022. It was a virtual event to celebrate and showcase the work done by the TCU Native languages programs and an opportunity for Native language professionals to network, share best practices and discuss current issues. 29 American Indian/Alaska Native languages are taught at the nation's 33 Tribal Colleges and Universities. 16 TCUs have degree programs or certificates in Native languages, and 7 TCUs teach more than one Native language (with NWIC championing in this area with 4), and some TCU language programs are the only places in the world to learn a particular indigenous language (e.g. Aaniiih language at Aaniiih Nakoda College).

The conference was a result of individual and regional planning meetings conducted by AIHEC with TCU faculty and administrators, which identified a nation-wide networking and information sharing event as a top priority. The conference planning and organization was overseen by the Advisory Group of senior TCU administrators and faculty. The event was supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's grant to AIHEC's Native Languages Initiative.

The conference featured two sessions of presentations by the leading TCU language programs, one on each day. On the first day, participants learned about Pane Immersion School at Bay Mills Community College, the Native language teacher training program at Salish Kootenai College, Mvskoke language and culture teachings at the College of Muscogee Nation, Lakota language assessment practices at Oglala Lakota College, and resource development at O'odham Language Center at Tohono O'odham Community College. The Ojibwe language program at Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College, White Clay Immersion School at Aaniiih Nakoda College, and the development of a doctoral-level Navajo language program at Dine College were the featured highlights of the second session.

Ronald Geronimo, Co-Director of the O'odham Language Center at Tohono O'odham Community College provided a traditional opening, after which the participants were welcomed by Carrie Billy, AIHEC President and CEO, Roxanne DeLille, Dean of Indigenous Studies at Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College, and Dr. Ofelia Zepeda, Professor at the University of Arizona and Tohono O'odham Community College Board of Regents Chairperson.

Dr. Richard Littlebear, President of Chief Dull Knife College, delivered a keynote lecture entitled "We Are Our Languages; Our Languages Are Us." Dr. Littlebear addressed the current situation of Native languages and the meaning and value of language revitalization to the indigenous communities and individuals. The keynote was followed by a panel of TCU Native language faculty, moderated by Roxanne DeLille, which discussed the current issues in TCU language revitalization. Dr. Michael Munson (SKC) spoke about the coordination of multiple tribal and state agencies to train Salish language teachers, Dr. Michael Migizi Sullivan (LCOOC) discussed linguistic research from a Native perspective, Jerica Niayuq Leavitt (IC) outlined the resources available to Inupiaq language learners and learning the language through cultural practices, and Mary Whitehair Frazier talked about the various forms and collaborations of Dine language teaching in urban settings. A TCU Presidents' panel moderated by Carrie Billy discussed the successes of TCU Native language programs, lessons learned from the pandemic era and strategic directions for future TCU language revitalization. The panelists included President Lane Azure (Sisseton Wahpeton College), Cory Sangrey-Billy (Stone Child College),

President Sean Chandler (Aaniiih Nakoda College), and President Charles “Monty” Roessel (Dine College).

The conference participants also had an opportunity to learn about resources and resource development assistance available to TCU Native language faculty and students through partner organizations. The session featured presentations from the representatives of the American Philosophical Society, American Indian Language Development Institute, 7000 Languages, and American Councils.

The conference concluded with a session of poetry in Native languages presented by acclaimed poets Qaggun Chelsey Zibell (Inupiaq), Norma Marshall (Mvskoke), Ofelia Zepeda (Tohono O’odham), Gus Panthaide Palmer, Jr. (Kiowa), and Richard Littlebear (Northern Cheyenne).

Edward Starr (Oglala Lakota College) closed the conference with traditional Lakota songs and stories.

Institute of American Indian Arts alumnus Bryson Meyers served as Master of Ceremonies.

The conference had more than 200 registered participants and each session was attended on average by 100 people.

Dr. Littlebear quotes

“What does language revitalization mean? It means a lot of work. It is a monumental effort, it means dedicating our life to the lifelong effort.”

“Why should we save our languages? We should save them for ourselves. We should save them as individuals.”