

STEVE SHEPHERD

Bakken Workforce Development Panel

My name is Steve Shepherd, I currently hold the positions of the CTE Coordinator and Welding Program Director at United Tribes Technical College, I am also a Union Ironworker out of Minneapolis/St. Paul, where I am specialized in welding on Sky Scrapers amongst other things. Interim President Phil Baird had a prior engagement and has asked me to fill in for him; I am honored to be sitting here in his place amongst these great leaders of respected colleges and organizations. In my position as the CTE Coordinator at United Tribes Technical College, I oversee all the short-term workforce training programs. These programs include Construction Technology, Electrical Technology, Heavy Equipment Operator/CDL, Welding, and Medical Billing and Coding.

In the great state of North Dakota, there are a lot of things going on. In conjunction with the Bakken Oil Boom, the state now has an unemployment rate of less than 3%. There were 23,501 job postings online through Job Service North Dakota as of July of this year, constituting an increase of 15% over the same time period of the previous year. There were only 8361 active in-state resumes to fill those jobs. Some employers have simply stopped looking for employees to fill positions.

The combined low unemployment rate and economic growth has created a critical workforce shortage in many industries in North Dakota. There are not enough qualified workers to fill the continual growing workforce demand in the region.

There is a great economic disparity on the American Indian reservations in the region. The TAACCCT grant has helped area community and tribal colleges to equip, furnish, and develop programs to train students. United Tribes Technical College received TAACCCT funding for a consortium project we call DeMaND. DeMaND is short for Tribal College Consortium for Developing Montana Workforce. The consortium partners include Cankdeska Cikana Community College in Spirit Lake, ND, Fort Peck Community College in Poplar, MT, and Aaniiih Nakoda College in Harlem, MT. Reservation communities served by the DeMaND Project are primarily low income, isolated and have experienced persistent and historical poverty and chronic unemployment. Unemployment rates on these reservations are much higher than any other part of the state, estimated at well over 50%. In 2005, prior to the economic recession, it was estimated that the unemployment rate was 66% for American Indians in North Dakota. It may be more accurate to compare "employment" rates rather than unemployment rates when discussing communities where a significant segment of the population stops looking for work because their odds of finding work are so low. Very little economic development activity occurs on the reservations in this region of the country, with the exception of the Fort Berthold Reservation, located in the center of the Bakken oil activity. "According to estimated ranges based on a 90% confidence interval, in several states including Montana and North Dakota, less than 50% of Native Americans are working, among those who are 16 years or older and who are living in or near the tribal areas of federally recognized tribes". The employment rates of Native Americans compared to non-Native

Americans in North Dakota are among some of the worst in the nation. In North Dakota, which is ranked second poorest, Native Americans are 24.4% less likely than non-Native Americans to be employed.

The regional workforce shortage is an opportunity to help people in and around these communities to train and access gainful employment, much of which exist off of the reservations in western North Dakota, and work toward breaking the cycle of poverty. The DeMaND project's primary focus is to help people living in these high poverty and low employment areas engage in the workforce opportunities available in this region. While it might seem relatively easy to train these folks for jobs, what is much harder is to help people who have lived with persistent poverty understand how to successfully transition into the workforce.

While workforce development is not a new concept to tribal colleges, the current situation we are in has helped area colleges such as United Tribes build their capacity through the use of state-of-the-art equipment, rigorous examination of students support and educational practices, and working in close partnership with other Tribal Colleges and regional employers, which has been a new and exciting pathway. We have learned a lot so far.

Regional employers have indicated that a lack of available qualified workforce have caused some to stop looking for new workers and to limit their operations accordingly. They are also anxious to work with colleges to help strengthen their workforce. One partner employer indicated that the only condition holding them back from expanding into the Bakken is a lack of quality employees or prospects. There are various employers such as Butler Machinery, RDO, BNSF as well as the local Pipe-Fitters, Ironworkers, Boilermakers, Electricians and Operators Unions that have a huge need for employees across the state of North Dakota. It is no secret that there is a severe workforce shortage in North Dakota. Conversely, there is a high unemployment (low Unemployment) rates on the reservation, because of the rural nature of the colleges in their home agency, training programs are often offered in isolation and are not readily available to students who do not already live in close proximity to the institutions that offer them due to a lack of housing and that is where UTTC comes in. Typically, TCU programs are limited to students who live in the vicinity of the colleges because of a lack of housing. United Tribes Technical College is different and an exception due to the fact we have housing and dorms.

The College has garnered support from Job Service North Dakota, which oversees the TAA for Workers programs and the Workforce Investment Board in North Dakota. Job Service North Dakota has agreed to partner with the project to help promote the project. We have to extend great gratitude to Job Service North Dakota who coordinated the Skill Build Program which has helped fund many of the students in our programs. While we understand that opportunity may not become available again, Job Service is willing to provide student support resources as available. That kind of support is critical to student success and program success.

At UTTC, we offer Welding, Electrical Tech, Construction Tech and are currently expanding our Heavy Equipment/CDL program as well as all the other programs UTTC has to offer. We have state-of-the-art facilities and equipment and believe we have some of the best Instructors the industry has to offer. UTTC ensures that graduates have the technical skills they need for the occupation for which they are trained. One of the greatest challenges, however, has been helping students transition from the training programs to employment. There are several reasons hypothesized for this phenomenon based on broader studies regarding poverty and unemployment trends, including family responsibilities, substance abuse challenges, insecurities and lack of reliable transportation. In addition, students who have limited or no experiences away from the reservation are insecure and less confident about gaining employment away from the reservation. There is a limited economic development and few job opportunities within the reservations which tribal colleges are located. Students must commute or relocate in order to attain gainful employment in these high Demand fields. Students that have significant experience through military, previous work experience, living or schooling are much more confident about accessing employment after completion of training. Those who have had little or no experience were reticent about accessing employment after completing training. Reasons for this vary and students are unclear about workplace expectations and culture, they have difficulty envisioning life away from extended family in unfamiliar communities and they don't know how to manage family obligations and work, some simply fear the unknown, that's the work I am here to do, to help each and every student that comes to UTTC for training in one of our short term workforce training programs. We understand these are some of the same reasons students choose local Tribal Colleges rather than mainstream institutions. Although mainstream colleges have support systems in place for traditional students, Tribal Colleges foster cultural identity, have strong connections to local communities, provide culturally responsive curricula and offer supportive faculty as mentors and advisors who provide academic and emotional support and are often considered one of the most important components of the overall educational experience.

Students from all over the country come to UTTC. When they complete their training, they are skilled in their chosen occupation. What is often difficult to overcome is those "starting costs" of living on their own without the student services and housing available at UTTC. As a way to help graduates enter the workforce, we have come up with a new strategy. Now we can offer students who pursue employment in the Bismarck/Mandan area the option of an extended stay so that upon completion of their respective training, students can stay at UTTC for up to 3 months as long as they abide by the rules of the college and are employed until they are able to afford an apartment or other housing of their own

We continue to work on developing strategies designed to address the workforce shortage in the region while decreasing unemployment and poverty on the state's reservations. Tribal Colleges have the best access to the untapped labor force on the reservations. The funding from the North Dakota Tribal College Grant through the Department of Commerce, funding from EDA and TAACCCT funding from the Department of Labor have helped UTTC build the infrastructure needed to provide quality training for high wage, high skill, and high demand jobs in this region.

Thank you all for listening.

All information was gathered from Job Service ND