

Indian Country School Counselor Institute (ICSCI)

Pathways with Purpose: Culturally Rooted Career Exploration for Indigenous Youth

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Topic and Context

In Indigenous communities, education is deeply rooted in cultural meaning, community connection, and intergenerational responsibility. For many Indigenous youth, the journey to discovering a future career is not just about employment—it encompasses identity, contribution, and the continuation of a legacy characterized by resilience and purpose. However, traditional models of career counseling often overlook these cultural dimensions, favoring standardized, individualistic approaches that may not reflect the lived realities or aspirations of Indigenous students. In response, this counseling practice guide proposes a culturally grounded approach to career exploration that honors Indigenous values and utilizes cultural knowledge as a source of strength and guidance.

This counseling practice guide will focus on developing a culturally grounded approach to career exploration for middle school (grades 6–8) and high school (grades 9–12) students at Dishchii'bikoh Community School, located within the White Mountain Apache community. The school is a tribally controlled school serving approximately 280 students in grades 6–12 in the White Mountain Apache community of Cibecue, Arizona. It is located on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation and is operated by the tribe in partnership with the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). Students at Dishchii'bikoh grow up deeply rooted in Apache language, culture, and traditions, and many maintain close ties to extended family and the land. The community is rich in intergenerational knowledge, and education is seen not just as individual success but as collective contribution.

The aim is to support students in exploring their future aspirations in a manner that honors their cultural identity, values, and lived experiences. The guide will assist students in connecting their personal goals with career pathways that are both relevant and meaningful to their communities.

The guide will be implemented during the first quarter of the academic year—between August and October—when students are transitioning into new grade levels and beginning to set academic and personal goals. This period is particularly significant for initiating early career conversations, helping students reflect on their strengths, and providing direction as they prepare for events such as career fairs, dual enrollment applications, and Individual Student Success Plans (ISSPs).

Culturally responsive career counseling is essential for Indigenous students, whose pathways to success are often shaped by a unique set of cultural, historical, and community-based factors. Research shows that career education is more effective when it integrates students' cultural contexts and reflects their values and ways of knowing (Beaulieu, 2006; Demmert & Towner, 2003). At Dishchii'bikoh Community School, this means creating career development opportunities that align not only with academic standards but also with Apache traditions, language, and community priorities. Many students participate in seasonal ceremonies with their families, and several have shared that missing school during these events can make them feel

“*behind.*” Recognizing this cultural rhythm in counseling helps validate students’ identities instead of framing it as absenteeism.

This guide will draw on the principles outlined in the CRAIS Tool (Castagno, Joseph, Kretzmann, & Dass, 2022), a framework for culturally responsive schooling in Indigenous-serving schools. Each component of the guide will reflect the CRAIS Tool’s five core principles: relationality and community, Indigenous knowledge systems, sociopolitical context and self-determination, representation of Indigenous peoples, and critical understandings of race and diversity. These principles will help ensure the guide supports students not only in building academic and career readiness, but also in affirming their identity and cultivating a sense of purpose.

By aligning the guide with both ASCA standards (ASCA, 2019) and Indigenous-centered frameworks, this counseling tool will become a valuable resource throughout the school year. It will be used during individual counseling sessions, small-group activities, and classroom guidance lessons. Activities will be differentiated for middle school and high school levels: younger students will begin with identity exploration and community-based career awareness, while older students will engage in goal-setting, pathway planning, and building connections between their future goals and community impact.

Rationale

The development of this guide is rooted in day-to-day experiences within the school counseling context and an increasing awareness of how critical culturally responsive practice is in Indigenous education. At Dishchii’bikoh, students demonstrate strong cultural pride and are deeply connected to their families and *the land*. Yet, when it comes to post-secondary planning, many express uncertainty—not due to a lack of ambition, but because the options presented to them often feel disconnected from their cultural identities and lived realities.

Research confirms that Indigenous students are more likely to engage with school and envision their futures positively when they see their cultural identities reflected in their learning experiences (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Cajete, 1994). Culturally responsive career counseling, therefore, must go beyond presenting a list of college majors or job titles. It should help students understand how their values, traditions, and community strengths can shape their goals and their definitions of success.

This rationale is also supported by the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) position that effective school counseling programs must promote equity and access, especially for historically marginalized student populations (ASCA, 2019). For Indigenous students, this includes acknowledging the effects of historical trauma, systemic barriers, and underrepresentation

in post-secondary institutions and leadership roles. At the same time, it also means honoring resilience, community knowledge, and the rich cultural legacy students carry with them.

This guide reflects the CRAIS Tool's emphasis on relationality and community by encouraging students to explore career options in the context of family, tribe, and community needs. Activities include learning from local role models, elders, and professionals who have pursued paths rooted in service and tradition. It also centers Indigenous knowledge systems, validating cultural roles such as medicine people, artists, language teachers, and environmental stewards as meaningful careers.

In alignment with the principle of self-determination, students will be encouraged to see career planning as a form of nation-building. Career choices will not be framed simply as individual decisions, but as acts of leadership and responsibility to the collective. Indigenous education scholar Gregory Cajete (1994) emphasizes that education in Indigenous communities is not solely about individual advancement, but about maintaining harmony with the natural and human world—an idea this guide embraces.

Finally, the guide challenges deficit-based thinking by incorporating critical understandings of race and history. Students will be encouraged to think critically about representation, equity, and systemic challenges while also celebrating Indigenous innovation, strength, and future leadership. This approach aligns with Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory, which affirms the centrality of Indigenous epistemologies in educational spaces.

To encourage students to think critically about representation, equity, and systemic challenges, the counselor will integrate guided discussions, inquiry-based projects, and culturally responsive activities. For example, students will analyze media portrayals of Indigenous peoples compared to community-based narratives, allowing them to critique misrepresentation and affirm authentic voices. Structured classroom dialogues and Socratic seminars will provide safe spaces where students can question systemic barriers in education and employment while also highlighting stories of Indigenous resilience and leadership.

To celebrate Indigenous innovation and strength, students will be invited to explore case studies of Apache and other Native leaders, entrepreneurs, and knowledge keepers who are shaping contemporary fields such as technology, environmental stewardship, and the arts. Vision board activities and identity mapping worksheets will give students opportunities to visualize their own pathways while drawing from cultural values and strengths. Additionally, family interviews and intergenerational storytelling will be incorporated so students connect equity and systemic challenges to lived community wisdom.

This approach will ensure that Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) is not only a guiding framework but also an active method in practice. By centering Indigenous voices, knowledge systems, and aspirations within counseling and career exploration, students will critically evaluate

inequities while building pride in their cultural heritage and confidence in their capacity for leadership.

In one small group facilitated by the counselor at Dishchii'bikoh in 2024, students explained that when they see role models—like older cousins who are firefighters, teachers, or tribal leaders—they feel more motivated to work hard in school because “*that could be me someday.*”

In creating this guide, the counselor acknowledges an ongoing learning process. While the counselor brings professional experience and training, the wisdom of the community—elders, students, and families—shapes this work authentically. This is not just a career unit. It is an affirmation that students’ future paths are powerful, valuable, and deeply connected to where they come from and who they are becoming.

Instructional Guide

The purpose of this counseling guide is to support Indigenous students—specifically White Mountain Apache youth at Dishchii'bikoh High School—in exploring meaningful, culturally grounded career pathways. The guide will be implemented across grades 6–12, with developmentally appropriate variations for junior high and high school students. Career exploration is approached as an identity-affirming, community-centered process rather than a strictly individual or economic decision. Students will be supported in identifying their strengths, interests, and cultural values, and in aligning these with career and post-secondary goals that serve both personal growth and community wellbeing.

Essential Background Concepts

Career development for Indigenous students must be rooted in culturally sustaining pedagogies that affirm their lived experiences and collective identities. Culturally responsive counseling in Indigenous contexts involves honoring place-based knowledge, valuing traditional roles alongside modern careers, and helping students understand how their future goals can contribute to tribal self-determination and community healing (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Cajete, 1994).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) also emphasizes the importance of equity, access, and identity-affirming support in career and academic counseling (ASCA, 2019). This guide blends the ASCA framework with the CRAIS Tool (Castagno et al., 2022), ensuring that Indigenous knowledge systems, relationships, and representation are central to the approach. Instructional strategies are informed by developmental models of career education, such as Super’s Life-Span Theory, which highlights the importance of early career awareness and identity formation in adolescence (Super, 1990).

Counseling Strategies and Sequence of Activities

The guide follows a four-part instructional sequence, tailored by grade level:

1. *Exploring Identity and Community Strengths (Weeks 1–2)*
 - a. Identity Mapping
 - b. Guest speakers and storytelling from local professionals
 - c. Journaling and group sharing
2. *Introducing Career Awareness and Indigenous Roles (Weeks 3–4)*
 - a. Career interest inventories (O*NET and Apache-adapted versions)
 - b. Research on culturally relevant careers
 - c. Discussion of traditional and contemporary community roles
3. *Planning Pathways and Setting Goals (Weeks 5–6)*
 - a. Transcript review and goal setting
 - b. Dream path and vision board creation
 - c. Family dialogue and interviews
4. *Preparing to Share and Take Action (Weeks 7–8)*
 - a. Presentations and small group feedback
 - b. ISSP support and post-secondary planning
 - c. Community reflection

Culturally Responsive Practices Embedded

1. *Indigenous Knowledge Systems*: Includes roles like traditional healer, storyteller, and tribal leader
2. *Relationality and Community*: Activities include family engagement and local mentorship
3. *Self-Determination*: Focus on nation-building, service, and sovereignty
4. *Representation*: Guest speakers and media that reflect Indigenous excellence
5. *Critical Race Awareness*: Reflecting on barriers, resilience, and community advocacy

Assessment Tools

1. Journal reflections
2. Vision boards
3. Goal sheets
4. Exit slips and counselor observations

This unit will be embedded in the existing guidance calendar and used in both individual and group formats. It aims to help students see their futures as acts of cultural affirmation, leadership, and contribution to the collective.

Counseling Activities Overview

Topic Area	Grade Levels	Learning Objectives	Counseling Strategies	Learning Resources	Assessment
Identity and Strengths	6–12	Students will reflect on personal and cultural identity.	Identity Maps, Guest Speakers	Identity Journals, Templates	Reflective Writing
Career Awareness	6–9	Students will explore career options, including Indigenous roles.	Career Inventories, Group Discussion	O*NET, Apache-specific Career Lists	Inventory Results, Class Discussion
Career Planning	10–12	Students will develop action steps and goals toward a career path.	Transcript Review, Goal Setting, and Vision Boards	ISSP Forms, Goal Sheets	Vision Board Presentation
Community Engagement	6–12	Students will connect careers to community contributions.	Interviews, Storytelling Circles	Family Interview Guides	Oral presentation, peer feedback

The counseling activities are designed to guide students in developing a strong sense of identity rooted in both self-reflection and cultural heritage. Each activity not only engages students in exploring their personal strengths and goals but also intentionally connects them to Apache and Indigenous ways of knowing.

1. Identity Mapping (Grades 6–12)

A. *What it looks like:* Students will create visual “maps” that include their values, talents, interests, family roles, and community connections. The counselor will provide guiding questions such as:

- “What are three strengths that make you proud?”
- “Who are the people that have shaped your sense of who you are?”
- “What Apache or family traditions do you want to carry into the future?”

B. *How this builds identity:* This activity allows students to see themselves holistically—not only as individuals but also as members of families, tribes, and future professional communities.

2. Vision Boards (Grades 9–12)

A. *What it looks like:* Students will design boards that display their future goals (career, education, community roles) alongside Apache symbols, teachings, or stories that inspire them.

B. *Journal topics paired with this activity:*

- “What kind of leader do you want to become in your community?”
- “What barriers might you face in reaching your goals, and how can your culture and community support you?”

C. *How this builds identity:* Students connect future aspirations with cultural identity, reinforcing that being Indigenous is not separate from success, but central to it.

When a similar activity was piloted, one student filled the vision board with images of horses, rodeo competitions, and a police badge. The student explained that a relative was a police officer who also competed in rodeos, and that balance was what the student wanted in the future. These kinds of examples show how vision boards naturally tie into lived identities.

3. Family Interviews (Grades 6–12)

- A. *What it looks like:* Students interview parents, grandparents, or guardians about their educational and career journeys. They will then share reflections in small groups or journals.
- B. *Journal prompts:*
 - a. “What lessons did you learn from your family about hard work or resilience?”
 - b. “What do you admire about your family’s contributions to the community?”
- C. *How this builds identity:* By grounding exploration in family and community narratives, students see their personal goals as extensions of collective history and responsibility.

4. Journaling as Ongoing Identity Work (Grades 6-12)

Students will keep reflective journals throughout the activities. Sample entries include:

- A. “*Describe a time when you felt proud of your Apache heritage.*”
- B. “*What makes you unique in your class, family, or community?*”
- C. “*What does success mean to you—not just in school, but in life?*”
- D. “*If you could teach the next generation one lesson, what would it be?*”

5. Group Dialogue and Sharing Circles

- A. *What it looks like:* After completing activities like identity maps or vision boards, students gather in circles to share highlights. Each student may share one symbol, value, or lesson from their work.
- B. *How this builds identity:* These circles affirm students’ voices, validate multiple identities, and reinforce belonging by showing common threads across experiences.

Assessment of Identity Growth

Instead of only measuring academic outcomes, assessment will include:

- A. Student journals reviewed for depth of reflection.
- B. Growth in self-expression and cultural pride observed in sharing circles.
- C. Student-created artifacts (maps, boards, interviews) that demonstrate integration of cultural values and personal goals.

Pre- and Post-Test Assessments

Purpose: To measure growth in cultural identity, self-awareness, and career exploration skills.

Pre-Test (administered at the start of the program)

Format: Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) and short-answer.

1. I feel confident talking about my Apache identity and cultural heritage.
2. I know about Apache traditional values related to education and work.
3. I can identify at least three personal strengths or skills.
4. I know at least two career paths that interest me.
5. I understand how my cultural values can guide my future career choices.
6. I see Apache leaders or community members as role models for my future.
7. Short Answer: What do you think it means to have a “purposeful pathway” in life?

Post-Test (administered at the end of the program)

Repeat the Likert scale for comparison, with additional reflection.

1. I feel more confident in expressing my Apache identity and cultural heritage.
2. I have learned more about Apache traditions, values, and stories that shape who I am.
3. I can identify at least three personal strengths or skills connected to my culture.
4. I know at least three career paths and how they align with my identity and values.
5. I understand how Indigenous perspectives can shape education and career goals.
6. I see myself as a future leader who can give back to my community.
7. Short Answer: What is one cultural teaching or story you will carry forward in your future career journey?

In trial conversations, students often rated themselves lower on “I feel connected to my culture” before activities, but after journaling about traditional stories or clan values, they described feeling “proud” or “strong.” Adding open space for written reflection on the survey allows students to explain their scores in their own words.

Journal Prompts

Students keep a reflective journal throughout. Journals can be notebooks or digital.

Identity-Building Journals

1. Who am I? Describe the parts of your identity that are most important to you (family, clan, language, traditions, talents).
2. What values did your family or elders teach you about hard work, respect, or education?
3. How do you think your ancestors viewed learning and leadership?

Career-Exploration Journals

1. What careers do you see in your community? Which interests you most? Why?
2. How can Apache cultural values (respect, resilience, connection to land, kinship) guide your career path?
3. After hearing from today's guest speaker, what inspired you? What did you learn about connecting identity with career?

Storytelling/Media Journals

1. After listening to the Apache song or story, what message stood out to you? How does it relate to your own goals?
2. What do you think this story teaches about perseverance, leadership, or community?
3. If you had to write your own story about your future, what would the first chapter look like?

In previous school assemblies, elders who told traditional Apache stories had students listening more attentively than any PowerPoint ever could. Several students later wrote in their journals that they wanted to “ask my grandma about our stories,” showing how cultural resources spark personal curiosity.

Detailed Lesson Instructions

Week-by-week breakdown that ties together identity, culture, and career exploration:

Lesson 1: Who Am I? Identity Mapping

1. Objective: Build self-awareness of personal and cultural identity.
2. Activity: Students complete an *Identity Map Worksheet* (name, clan/family connections if appropriate, strengths, traditions, favorite subjects).

3. Journal Prompt: “Who am I? What parts of my Apache heritage or family values shape my goals?”
4. Assessment: Collect identity maps for formative review.

Lesson 2: Storytelling and Cultural Strengths

1. Objective: Use Apache stories to reflect on values and resilience.
2. Activity: Play a cultural video or share a traditional Apache story (e.g., *The Origin of Fire* or a teaching story about Coyote). Discuss the lesson.
3. Journal Prompt: “What lesson did you learn from today’s story? How can you use that teaching in your own life?”
4. Assessment: Exit ticket—students write one Apache value that connects to education or careers.

Lesson 3: Vision Boards – Imagining the Future

1. Objective: Connect identity to future career goals.
2. Activity: Students create vision boards (using magazines, printouts, or digital tools).
Include: careers, role models, cultural symbols, and values.
3. Journal Prompt: “Looking at my vision board, what future do I imagine for myself? How do my Apache values show up in my vision?”
4. Assessment: Students present their boards in small groups.

Lesson 4: Family/Community Interviews

1. Objective: Build intergenerational knowledge and honor community voices.
2. Activity: Students interview a parent, elder, or community member about their views on education, work, and cultural responsibility.
3. Journal Prompt: “What did I learn from my family interview about the role of education and work in our Apache community?”
4. Assessment: One-page reflection essay.

Lesson 5: Career Exploration & Guest Speakers

1. Objective: Connect student identity with real-world career pathways.
2. Activity: Invite Apache professionals (e.g., health workers, educators, environmental stewards, artisans) to present.
 - a. Provide presenters with guiding questions, such as:
 - i. How has your Apache identity influenced your career path?
 - ii. What values or teachings from your family/community shaped your success?

- iii. What advice would you give young Apache students about pursuing education and careers?
- 3. Journal Prompt: “Which presenter inspired me most and why? What values did they highlight that I also want to carry forward?”
- 4. Assessment: Students list three careers of interest and how they connect to their values.

Lesson 6: Reflection & Post-Test

- 1. Objective: Measure growth and celebrate student progress.
- 2. Activity: Administer post-test, discuss growth from pre-test results, and hold a reflection circle.
- 3. Journal Prompt: “How have I grown in understanding who I am and where I want to go?”
- 4. Assessment: Compare pre- and post-test results; review journals for themes of identity and purpose.

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Appendix A

Identity Mapping Worksheet

Name: _____

Grade: _____

Date: _____

Instructions: Think about who you are—your values, interests, and the people and places that shape your identity. Use the boxes below to fill in words, phrases, or images.

1. My Strengths:

- a. _____
- b. _____

2. Important People in My Life:

- a. _____
- b. _____

3. Traditions or Practices I Value:

- a. _____
- b. _____

4. Languages I Speak or Hear at Home:

- a. _____

5. Places That Matter to Me:

- a. _____

6. What I'm Proud of in My Culture:

- o _____

Reflection Prompt:

"How do these parts of my identity influence what I want to do in the future?"

Appendix B

Vision Board Planning Sheet

Name: _____

Grade: _____

Date: _____

Instructions: You will create a visual representation of your future goals and dreams. Use this sheet to brainstorm before creating your final vision board.

1. Career or Role I Want to Explore:

a. _____

2. What Kind of Life Do I Want to Build?

(Think about home, family, education, community, etc.)

a. _____

3. What Skills or Talents Will Help Me?

a. _____

4. Which Values or Teachings from My Culture Will Guide Me?

a. _____

5. Images, Words, or Symbols I Want to Include:

a. _____

Optional: Attach magazine clippings, sketches, or printed images with this sheet.

Appendix C

Family Interview Guide

Name: _____

Grade: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Family Member Interviewed: _____

Purpose: Learn from the experiences, values, and career paths of someone in your family or community.

Sample Questions (choose at least 5):

1. What kind of work have you done in your life?
2. What job did you dream about when you were my age?
3. Who inspired you or helped you find your path?
4. What does it mean to work for our community?
5. What are the most important lessons you've learned?
6. How did your culture influence your career or goals?
7. What hopes do you have for the younger generation?

What I Learned From This Interview:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Appendix D

Career Role Model Spotlight Template

Name: _____

Grade: _____

Date: _____

Role Model Name: _____

Tribal Affiliation (if known): _____

Career or Role: _____

1. Why I Chose This Person:

2. Challenges They Overcame:

3. How Their Work Serves the Community:

4. What I Admire Most About Them:

5. How This Inspires Me:
