



Introduction to Tohono O’odham Community College (TOCC)

The Tohono O’odham—the Desert People—are the founders of Tohono O’odham Community College, which is headquartered on the Tohono O’odham Nation, a 4,460-square mile expanse of Sonoran Desert in southern Arizona. The residents of the Nation are Tohono O’odham Community College’s primary constituency, though the College is open to all. The College, chartered by the Tohono O’odham Legislative Council in 1998, is near the seat of the Nation’s government in Sells, Arizona, 60 miles west of Tucson, 100 miles south of Phoenix, and 25 miles north of the Mexican border.

The College is one of 37 Tribal Colleges and Universities in the United States. It was created through the efforts of a group of visionary Tohono O’odham Nation members who drew inspiration from the success of the tribal college movement dating to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Those years of awakening across Indian Country were marked by the advent of the American Indian Movement, which mobilized a generation to protest the federal government’s termination policies of the 1950s through the late 1960s.

The protest movement—which included the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969, a standoff with the U.S. government at Wounded Knee in 1973, and many more events—led to reforms that included the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 and other key legislation that provided mechanisms for tribal nations to strengthen their sovereignty and to take a measure of control over the regulatory agencies that had evolved over the previous century to administer U.S. colonial rule.

Inspired by this movement and valuing higher education, throughout the 1970s and 1980s the Tohono O’odham explored possibilities, discussed, and dreamed of having a local college. The Tohono O’odham Nation established a Skill Center in 1981, which provided apprenticeship training in the building and construction trades on the site that is now TOCC’s Wişag Koş Maşcamakuđ. This Career Center operated through 2001, when it became part of Tohono O’odham Community College. In 1987, the Nation adopted Tohono O’odham Education Standards, which emphasized the importance of teaching and using the Tohono O’odham language.

In the 1990s, the Tohono O’odham Nation took further action: 1) With K-12 education partners, the Nation’s Education Department conducted a reservation-wide survey on education, which found the establishment of a community college to be a priority; and 2) a “Joint Action Task

Force” with partners from the Nation’s government, from K-12 school systems, and from the county’s Pima Community College explored the feasibility of establishing a community college and took preliminary steps to do so.

In 1996, the Tohono O’odham Legislative Council passed a resolution supporting the establishment of a community college on the Nation. In 1998, the Council chartered Tohono O’odham Community College and appointed its first Board of Trustees. Two years later, in January 2000, TOCC opened its doors with 79 students enrolled in 13 classes. The College’s motto is Ñia, Oya G T-Taccui Am Hab E-ju:—Our Dream Fulfilled (or literally, “Look, our dream has come true!”).

TOCC benefits from the actions of Native leaders and the struggles of earlier times in a variety of ways. Its membership in the American Indian Higher Education Consortium makes it eligible for recognition and funding under the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act of 1978. Its status as a land grant college, made available by the Equity in Education Land Grant Status Act of 1994, affords TOCC with many opportunities for programs and funding related to agriculture.

TOCC’s founding documents should be understood in terms of the Native American Renaissance started in the 1960s and the ongoing efforts of tribes to assert their inherent sovereign rights as tribal nations. The College’s mission is to strengthen the O’odham Himdag (the O’odham culture, language, and lifeways) through quality higher education. Its vision is to become the Nation’s center for higher education. The charge is clear. As an institution of higher education under Tohono O’odham control, the College is committed to and daily engages in the project of nation building.

During its early years, Tohono O’odham Community College benefited from an accreditation agreement with Pima Community College. When the San Carlos Apache Tribe in southeastern Arizona reached out to ask for help in establishing a tribal community college, TOCC gladly extended its assistance in making San Carlos Apache College (SCAC) a TOCC site as SCAC prepares for its HLC candidacy for accreditation.

Today, TOCC is a small but growing, two-year institution. Enrollment doubled from 2015 to 2020, to nearly 500 students. Online course delivery commenced in spring 2020 in response to the coronavirus pandemic. In fall 2020, to ward off a widely predicted decline in U.S. college enrollment, TOCC offered free tuition to Native Americans. Enrollment surged to over 850 students representing 52 Native nations.

Course delivery will continue to be online at least through spring 2021. Meanwhile, preparing for a new-normal of higher, stable, in-person enrollment (combined with an ongoing presence online), the College has constructed an arts and sciences building and a wellness center, and is continuing with plans to build an O’odham language center and additional dorms. These long-term endeavors symbolize Tohono O’odham Community College’s continued dedication to serving the Tohono O’odham Nation.