
The Government of the United States of America welcomes the opportunity to respond to the EMRIP letter of November 11, 2011 and is pleased to provide a response to the role of languages and culture in the promotion and protection of the rights and identity of indigenous peoples within the United States.

On December 16, 2010, President Obama announced U.S. support for the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, underscoring our commitment to further U.S. government policy on indigenous issues. As President Obama has recognized, the indigenous peoples of North America have invaluable cultural knowledge and rich traditions, which continue to thrive in Native American communities across the United States. The many facets of Native American cultures – including their religions, languages, traditions, and arts – need to be protected. Consistent with Executive Order 13175 and the President’s November 5, 2009 memorandum on tribal consultation, the U.S. government has increased its consultations with tribal communities on these and other issues.

Elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education is vital to improving relations with indigenous peoples. Moreover, education can build upon the strengths of indigenous peoples by fortifying their identity, culture, and language. Similarly, affording indigenous peoples respect, dignity, recognition, and opportunity can strengthen national governments and our societies.

In the United States, tribal colleges provide access to post-secondary education and opportunities for individuals to realize career and academic aspirations. If not for these institutions, many students in tribal communities would be denied post-secondary education. Tribal colleges provide a welcoming atmosphere that helps Native American students negotiate the unfamiliar domain of post-secondary education. Started as alternatives to mainstream post-secondary institutions, which had proved inadequate to address the post-secondary needs of tribal communities, tribal colleges promote an academic culture within the greater culture of the community with support provided by the United States. The colleges play a central role in economic development by providing relevant job-related training. In addition, a central feature common to the tribal colleges is the emphasis on languages and culture. The tribal colleges contribute Native American graduates, some of whom join academia on and off the reservation in the United States, promising a brighter future for the study of languages and culture.

The U.S. Department of the Interior, through its Bureau of Indian Education (DOI/BIE), provides funding specifically to support Native language development. Approximately two-thirds of schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Education are operated by Indian tribes.
Tribally operated schools are actively engaged in initiatives to preserve their respective cultures and languages. The Bureau of Indian Education has a specific project to assist tribal schools and Indian tribes with the development of Native language oral assessments, in support of language revitalization efforts.

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE), through its Office of Indian Education, provides funding to school districts and Indian tribes to support comprehensive programs that address language and culture of Indian students. The Department of Education also provides funds, through competitive grants, to over 60 tribally controlled colleges and universities, and it provides funding for elementary and secondary programs that serve Indian students through a variety of formula and discretionary grants.

The Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Native Americans (HHS/ANA) administers grants for Native American language preservation and maintenance. ANA held its first Language Symposium in September 2011, for its language grantees to build and shares best practices; discuss challenges and barriers; and identify necessary resources to support language and culture in Native communities. The information gathered at this symposium will be used to strengthen policies and technical assistance, and to improve coordination and language sustainability.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) recognizes the important role that culture and language play in promoting and protecting justice, safety, and wellness in tribal communities. Through its grant-making components, DOJ has supported numerous community initiatives that incorporate traditional cultural practices. These include traditional healing ceremonies for victims of crimes; restorative justice models; and prevention work with youth that focuses on promoting their connection to their traditional cultures.

U.S. government support for the preservation, revitalization, and promotion of indigenous languages has also been extended to programs abroad. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has, through its education programs, promoted curricula and materials in indigenous languages and assisted national education programs in promoting the preservation of indigenous languages.

The Permanent Mission of the United States of America thanks the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights the assurances of its highest consideration.

The Permanent Mission of the

United States of America, Geneva,

February 17, 2012.