



Developing a Strengths-Based, Elder-Informed Curriculum for Reproductive Justice & Gender- Affirming Care in Native Communities



The Future Generations Collaborative is a collective impact partnership between Native serving and Native specific organizations, institutions, government, and community members. The Future Generations Collaborative centers traditional values and collaboration in providing and promoting public health and wellness to the Portland Native Community.

The Future Generations Collaborative at Barbie's Village in Portland, Oregon recognized a need for Native-centered education about reproductive health and gender-affirming care. They were awarded Reproductive Health Equity Funds (RHEF) by Seeding Justice to ensure a curriculum is developed and implemented for Native communities. The funds originated from the Oregon Legislature in 2022. RHEF is designed to address gaps in Oregon's reproductive healthcare infrastructure and expand access to the most vulnerable populations. RHEF provided financial support to projects, programs, and organizations focused on expanding reproductive health equity through four areas of focus: (1) provider workforce and other care investments, (2) direct support for people seeking abortion and other reproductive services, (3) community-based outreach and education, and (4) research.

The Future Generations Collaborative undertook a transformative journey to

design a strengths-based, Native-grounded curriculum centered on reproductive health disparities and supporting gender-affirming care. They ensured the curriculum was not just culturally specific but also included trauma and healing-informed lens. Rooted in community-based participatory research, this effort was a response to the enduring impact of historical trauma, ongoing colonialism in healthcare, and the erasure of traditional Native knowledge systems related to sexuality, relationships, and body autonomy.

The Approach

From the outset, Future Generations Collaborative prioritized elder and community involvement to co-create a curriculum reflective of Native values, practices, and lived experiences. This was designed to fill a knowledge gap, correct damaging narrative about their communities, and create a space to talk about sexual health with the goal of

restoring pre-colonial norms of Native people. The Future Generations Collaborative team engaged in interviews with 10 women ranging in age from 16 to 60 who held traditional knowledge in reproductive and sexual health. These dialogues informed eight lesson chapters addressing critical topics including being born, family systems, body sovereignty, coming of age, healthy relationships, pregnancy, and elder wisdom.

The Future Generations Collaborative also designed retreats for implementing the curriculum. These retreats also served as both learning platforms and feedback loops, where participants' reflections actively shaped curriculum updates (especially gaining insights from men and Two-Spirit persons). The retreats were multi-generational, drawing participants from across the U.S. and creating safe, inclusive spaces that uplifted women, men, and Two-Spirit individuals and emphasized intergenerational healing. Moreover, interactive and ceremonial elements, such as talking circles, smudging, and sacred symbols, were embedded to honor Native pedagogies during retreats using this curriculum.

The decision to involve elders and community members was more than methodological. In Native cultures, elders are the stewards of ancestral

wisdom. Their participation ensured the curriculum reclaimed and reactivated traditional knowledge systems, countering centuries of systemic marginalization. Given this, the curriculum addressed long standing misinformation in Native education by directly engaging with topics that are often left unspoken, such as sexual health, relationships, and gender. Historically, these areas have been portrayed through a Western lens, with many written accounts authored by white men whose perspectives reinforced colonial, racist, and harmful narratives about Native communities.

Instead of repeating the negative and inaccurate narrative, this curriculum centered body sovereignty and affirms diverse identities while acknowledging the deep and lasting impacts of boarding schools, medical colonialism, and intergenerational trauma. It created a safe, inclusive space for Native people across generations and genders to learn together about sexual and reproductive health justice and explore healthy expressions of sexuality. Participants were invited to examine how historical and inherited trauma shapes how they view and care for their bodies and how they relate to others. The curriculum encouraged self-reflection, helping individuals identify personal boundaries and understand what they want in healthy relationships.

It also focused on practical skills in exercising body autonomy and advocating for one’s own wellbeing. By reclaiming traditional knowledge and cultural values that promote open, respectful conversations about sexuality and relationships, the curriculum contributed to stronger, healthier Native communities.

“We broke out into a men's group, a women's group and a Two-Spirit group. It was very natural to do that. It's getting better and better in our indigenous communities. We're getting away from the homophobia that [was] imposed on us, and more Two-Spirit persons in the large group spoke up... they were so glad they had this opportunity, and that they were way more comfortable identifying themselves... Several of the Two-Spirit people shared that they... felt really comfortable about opening up, had less fear, [and] felt safe.”

Impact of the Retreats

The retreats were transformative in that they created a safe and culturally grounded space for Native people to explore topics that had often gone unspoken. In a powerful and unexpected development, men showed up and participated fully, challenging assumptions about who engages in conversations around healing, sexuality, and cultural restoration. Participants of all ages and genders, including youth, elders, Two-Spirit, women, and men, took part in talking circles, shared

personal stories, and honored the ceremonial nature of the work. Through engagement with ceremony and traditional practices, deep trust and connection were formed. Facilitators witnessed a growing sense of openness, emotional healing, and renewed pride in cultural identity among all who attended. The presence and vulnerability of Two-Spirit people added a significant layer of depth to the collective experience, underscoring the power of culturally anchored healing spaces.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

A major challenge was the limited historical record on elderhood and menopause. To address this, the team leaned into storytelling and elder interviews. Future Generations Collaborative also emphasized the importance of positionality in facilitation, recognizing that a living curriculum must honor the voices and identities of all genders and age groups.

“The conversations honestly focused around shame...like we weren't supposed to talk about it... especially the older generations... even down to our younger generations who are a little bit more open... We took [the conversations about shame] to really flip it. What's the opposite of shame? How do we incorporate... activities... in this curriculum that build that self-confidence and self-identity piece?”

“Our vision for this curriculum is that this is an offering. We're offering this curriculum to women, men and Two-Spirit relatives to not only help our young people build a foundation for their future, but inspire, possibly, those older generations, women, men and Two-Spirit relatives to really change how we regard one another in our communities, build respect for one another, and offer also like a space that's safe to a safe community, space where people can actually engage in conversation and learn about sexual, reproductive health, justice and healthy ways of being in our sexuality. It also seeks to kind of learn and address historical and intergenerational trauma and impacts that have occurred throughout history and even contemporary, ongoing colonial colonialism, so that people you know can build a sense of, you know, love and just pride in in their body and who they are, and so that that's kind of how I view it.”

Conclusion and Future Directions

Future Generation's use of this curriculum expanded access to community healthcare that is both culturally relevant and culturally grounded. Instead of relying on Western methods, the curriculum developers intentionally centered on traditional practices, drawing on community knowledge not only of how to treat but also how to meaningfully engage Native people in discussions about sexual health. This approach ensured the curriculum was not static but a living document, continuously shaped by retreat feedback, insights from community facilitators, and the evolving realities of Native life. The Future Generation Collaborative plans to form a revision workgroup that will expand the range of topics and deepen the curriculum's inclusivity. This project exemplifies how culturally rooted, community-led design fosters healing, learning, and the reclamation of identity.

