OCU Profile Series

OPPORTUNITY COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES



TOHONO O'ODHAM COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Carnegie Classification Opportunity Colleges & Universities of Institutions of Higher Education

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

ACE American Council on Education

Tohono O'odham Community College

Where Ancient Wisdom Fuels Radical Accessibility



In a land area larger than the state of Connecticut, near the U.S.-Mexico border outside of Tucson, Arizona, there are no traffic lights. There is one grocery store. There are 11 districts in the Tohono O'odham Nation that spread across the Sonoran Desert, connected by roads that can stretch up to 120 miles apart.

And there is one community college.

Tohono O'odham Community College (TOCC) serves the 28,000 members living in the Tohono O'odham Nation as its sole institution of higher education. When the 2025 Carnegie Student Access and Earnings Classification designated TOCC as an Opportunity College and University (OCU), President Dr. Stephen Schoonmaker wasn't surprised by the recognition. He was surprised by how well outsiders' metrics captured something intrinsic to the institution.

"This isn't a strategy we adopted," Dr. Schoonmaker says. "It's who we are."

The Carnegie Classifications — the nation's gold standard for over 50 years — now determines institutional excellence based not on prestige or student selectivity but on how well schools set their students up for success. The new Student Access and Earnings Classification framework evaluates institutions on these two critical metrics, with unique geographic contextualization. With more than 470 institutions nationwide designated as Opportunity Colleges and Universities (OCUs) for providing high access and competitive earnings, it's time to measure what matters most — student outcomes.

The OCU designation was designed to help ensure that higher education becomes an even more vital engine of economic mobility — particularly for students furthest from opportunity. Colleges and universities are reviewed every three years, and there is no limit to how many colleges can become OCUs.

Fruit from the Root: The Himdag as Institutional DNA

Most institutions talk about aligning programs with mission. At TOCC, that framing misses the point. The college operates from the Himdag — the Tohono O'odham way of life — not as something applied to education, but as the source from which education emerges.

The Himdag is an Indigenous way of knowing that has lasted for millennia. TOCC's role is to honor it and pass it forward.



Consider dry farming — ak-chin in O'odham, meaning "mouth of the wash." Visitors to the Sonoran Desert cannot believe crops grow without irrigation. But the Tohono O'odham have farmed this way for centuries, reading the land and the monsoons. Through TOCC's Land Grant Office and Extension Services, this wisdom is passed to new generations. All education at TOCC works the same way: It doesn't import knowledge from outside, it cultivates what has always been rooted here.

Four core values anchor the Himdag at TOCC: T-Wohocudadag, beliefs that guide all thought and action; T-Pi:k Elida, the deepest respect for people, land and all living things; T-Apedag, well-being of people and place; and I-We:mta, working together. Collectively, these form the T-So:son, the institution's core.

"If you think of the values as the root of the tree, the fruit that is borne by the tree comes from its foundation," Dr. Schoonmaker explains. "We don't create a fruit and then ask if it belongs on the tree."

This isn't just talk. At TOCC, all curriculum matters pass through both a traditional curriculum committee and a Himdag Committee. Every course outline, every program design, every institutional decision is examined not for alignment with values, but for whether it truly grew from them.

TikTok, a Pandemic and the Decision to Remove Every Barrier

Before 2020, TOCC enrolled fewer than 400 students, a fairly typical size among the nation's 37 tribal colleges and universities. Then came the pandemic, and with it, a decision rooted in the Himdag rather than in strategic calculation.

The college waived tuition. Then fees. Then housing costs, textbook fees, transcript fees and meal costs for residential students.

"When we say we are a college without fees," Dr. Schoonmaker says, "we mean all of them."

The college didn't launch a marketing campaign. In keeping with tradition, a grassroots word-of-mouth campaign spread. It was heightened by well-known Indigenous influencers and viral social media posts. One of the College's initial Facebook posts regarding "free tuition" garnered over 9,000 shares.

The math, it turned out, worked. Tuition had been $34.25 per credit hour — enough to create a barrier, not enough to sustain the institution. When the barrier disappeared, enrollment tripled — and because the college's funding is tied to enrollment, revenue followed. Today, tuition is $36 per credit hour — still less than one-quarter of the national average — and waived entirely, along with fees, for members of federally recognized Native sovereign nations.

Today, 95% of TOCC students are federally recognized tribal members, but they now come from nearly every state and learn virtually: The Tohono O'odham Nation has members in Phoenix, in Oklahoma, wherever the diaspora has taken them. The shift to online instruction during the pandemic made geographic barriers as removable as financial ones.

This transformation was born of a conviction. "This is what we believe," Dr. Schoonmaker says. "We intentionally take down barriers to access." Each year, the Board of Trustees revisits the decision: Should we continue waiving tuition and fees? Each year, they vote yes.



Stephen Schoonmaker, President TOCC

At TOCC...every course outline, every program design, every institutional decision is examined not for alignment with values, but for whether it truly grew from them.

Building Bathrooms, Building Futures

Economic mobility on the Tohono O'odham Nation defies conventional measurement. Standard poverty metrics don't capture the full picture. The return on investment from education is massive, precisely because the starting point is often what outsiders would call subsistence living — though that framing, too, misses something.

What TOCC creates is generational change. First-generation students earn associate's degrees; some transfer to four-year institutions; and some continue on to master's or doctorate programs. TOCC graduates now work in civil engineering, community infrastructure and tribal governance. The Tohono O'odham Utility Authority, which manages power, water and internet connectivity for the Nation, is staffed by people the college helped train.

The college's apprenticeship programs in carpentry, electrical and plumbing have become a particularly powerful engine for economic mobility. Students accumulate up to 8,000 on-the-job learning hours through community projects, often for elders.

"We're building bathrooms where there have never been bathrooms," Dr. Schoonmaker says. "We're building homes, creating infrastructure, restoring things that were never fully there." The most recent economic impact study captures the earnings gains — but the data don't capture community transformation.

One family showed what I-We:mta — working together — looks like in practice. A student parent who is an electrician apprentice enrolled in the electrical program and told Dr. Schoonmaker that her son and daughter have both enrolled in the carpentry program. The siblings weren't pursuing individual career paths: they were building collective capacity for a family business with their mom.

"They chose different trades intentionally, so that together they could start a business and serve their community," Dr. Schoonmaker explains. "It's not, 'What is good for me?' It's, 'How do we as a family support ourselves and our community?'"

TOCC didn't design this approach. The college didn't need to. When education emerges from a way of life that has lasted for generations, families already know how to use it.

Faculty Who Become Students First

At most institutions, faculty development means workshops on pedagogy or technology. At TOCC, it means becoming a learner yourself.

All employees, faculty included, take a language class and a history and culture class. They become students of the Tohono O'odham Himdag before they teach within it. The requirement isn't onboarding; it's transformation. Faculty come to understand and embrace not just what TOCC does, but why it approaches education differently.

Those who arrive expecting to teach their discipline the way they always have don't stay. But those who embrace the approach become something more. The science department chair, now in her 20th year at TOCC, infuses the Himdag into her curriculum so seamlessly that it's simply there — not an add-on, but the foundation. Even math is taught through the lens of I-We:mta — working together — because math is a language, and language is about communication.

The result is faculty who see themselves not only as content experts serving an institution, but as participants in a culture that will outlast them. For students, many of them first-generation, this means seeing their way of life reflected in those who teach them.

"They are fulfilling a mission that was before us, is here now, and will remain after us," Dr. Schoonmaker says. "And that's why it works."

The Root Holds

Across the Tohono O'odham Nation, there is still only one community college. But its reach now extends to 48 states; its enrollment has tripled; and its students are building the infrastructure of a sovereign Nation — one bathroom, one home, one family business at a time.

For its local students, and increasingly, for Native American learners across the country, TOCC offers something rare: an education that doesn't ask them to leave their way of life behind to build a future.

The Carnegie Student Access and Earnings Classification measures outcomes in years. The Himdag has been shaping outcomes for millennia. TOCC simply made the ancient accessible to the modern, and trusted what would grow from that root.

HIMDAG



Stephen Schoonmaker, President TOCC

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LEARN MORE

Tohono O'odham Community College

Tohono O'odham Community College's (TOCC) mission is to enhance our unique Tohono O'odham Himdag by strengthening individuals, families, and communities through holistic, quality higher education services. TOCC is a two-year college in Sells, Arizona, for individuals from all walks of life who want to further their education. TOCC primarily serves the residents of the Tohono O'odham Nation, but all who wish to pursue a higher education are welcome to attend. Our vision is to become the Tohono O'odham Nation's center for higher education and to enhance the Nation's participation in the local, state, national, and global communities.

Learn more at: https://www.tocc.edu.

Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education

The Carnegie Classification® is the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education. The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education developed the classification in 1973 to support its program of research and policy analysis. In 2022, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education partnered to re-envision the future of the Carnegie Classifications and better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education. The 2025 Carnegie Classifications were the first release through this partnership. The Carnegie Classifications will be updated next in 2028.

Learn more at: https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu.



Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

The mission of the Carnegie Foundation is to catalyze transformational change in education so that every student has the opportunity to live a healthy, dignified and fulfilling life. Established by an act of Congress in 1906, the Foundation has a rich history of driving significant change in the education sector, including the creation of TIAA-CREF, the Education Testing Service (ETS), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Pell Grants and the Carnegie Classifications for Higher Education. Today, the Foundation is dedicated to the transformation of the American high school and making the postsecondary sector a more vital engine for economic mobility.

Learn more at: www.carnegiefoundation.org.

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