



# Across the Divide: Supporting Indigenous Student Success

**Chief Dull Knife College**  
Lame Deer, MT

**April 2025**

Aspen Forum for Community Solutions  
Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

**What does it mean for a college to truly see its students for who they are? How can college leaders help rural Indigenous students access living wage jobs without asking them to abandon their traditional culture and ways of being in the world? Can a committed core of faculty shift the culture of an institution and weave positive Indigenous identity into the fabric of its educational programs?**

Chief Dull Knife College serves the Northern Cheyenne Tribal community in south eastern Montana. The college is undergoing a transformation process to better meet the changing needs of its students and community.

Originally founded with a narrow focus on training workers for the local workforce, Chief Dull Knife now serves as a starting point for many who go on to pursue bachelor's degrees through the Montana University system. As the college makes this shift, leaders are carefully weaving together two distinct forces: an imperative to center traditional Indigenous identity while helping students build skills students need to transfer to a four-year college and access living wage jobs. The college's new student success course is a microcosm for this work: aiming to help students make meaning of their present, identify and move toward their future purpose and looking to the past to deepen their understanding of where they come from.

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

Our next decade of work continues to focus on ending youth disconnection. We endeavor to transform systems and communities in ways that ensure that all youth can thrive. Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) is the emerging framework that is helping us to get there.

Learn more about AFCS and our work to advance BMWP at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/bmwp>

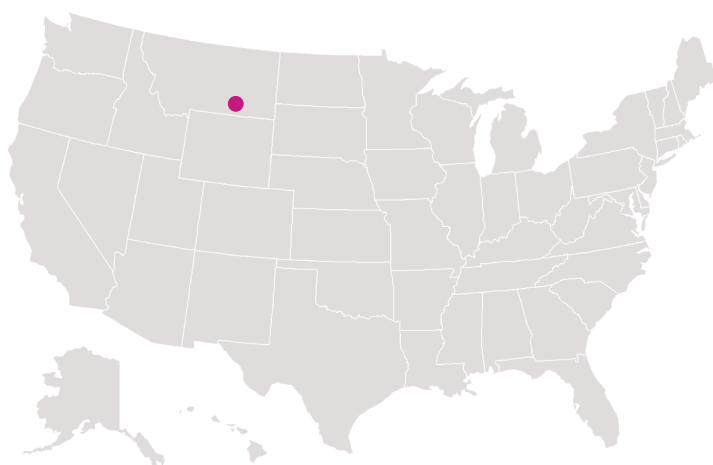
The BMWP in Action Series provides postsecondary practitioners and funders with concrete examples of how a diverse group of leaders are implementing a wide range of approaches to foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose (BMWP) amongst their students. The goal of the series is to:

- 1 **Celebrate the work of case study institutions**
- 2 **Increase awareness of BMWP**
- 3 **Encourage the spread of these approaches as a strategy to improve racial equity and student success.**



Chief Dull Knife campus  
(Photo by CDKC)

## Chief Dull Knife College



LOCATION:

**Lame Deer, MT**

INSTITUTION TYPE:

**Public 2-Year**

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT:

**242\***

\* Enrollment figure is from fall 2023. Data from US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. [College Navigator](#).



### Policy and Practice Highlight

This document contains several **policy and practice highlight** callout boxes. Each box highlights a specific approach that this college is taking to help students cultivate a deeper sense belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose.



## Context

Chief Dull Knife College (CDKC) was chartered with grant funding from the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1975 and the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council appointed six directors to oversee the college and its operations.<sup>1</sup> According to federal statistics, nearly all of the college's students (93 percent) identify as “American Indian or Alaska Native” and more than two-thirds of its students are over the age of twenty-five.<sup>2</sup>

In 1994, Chief Dull Knife was one of 29 tribal colleges awarded land-grant institution status as a part of the The Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act making it eligible for critical federal grant dollars.<sup>3</sup> While the land-grant program has been criticized for inequitable funding of HBCUs and tribal colleges relative to predominantly white institutions, federal grant dollars — along with support from the US Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Indian Education — continue to make up the majority of the college’s budget.<sup>4</sup>

The college is named in honor of Chief Dull Knife — also known as Chief Morning Star — who remains an important cultural figure in the Northern Cheyenne community for his role leading the tribe back to their homeland following a violent displacement to Oklahoma in 1876.<sup>5</sup> Chief Dull Knife remains an active inspiration for the work of the college. The college’s current website features his quote: “we have to learn a new way of life. Let us ask for schools to be built in our country so that our children can go to these schools and learn this new way of life.” The college’s journey can be seen as an attempt to lean into this intention and help the Northern Cheyenne community build skills, access living wage jobs and achieve economic prosperity.

When Chief Dull Knife College was founded, it offered vocational training certificates with the primary focus of training students to work in coal mines located close to the reservation. Leaders expanded course offerings over time and the college now offers 25 associate degree and certificate programs and serves as a transfer institution through its articulation agreements with the Montana University system.



Chief Dull Knife students in the field with a drone



## College-ready students and a student-ready college

President Eva Flying became Chief Dull Knife's sixth president and its first female president in October of 2022. In announcing the selection of President Flying, CDKC Board Vice Chair Sidney Fox emphasized the importance of Flying's, "connections with the surrounding communities and roots to our homeland" as key factors in their selection process. Flying is an enrolled member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. Her Cheyenne name — Vóestaã'e meaning White Buffalo Calf Woman — was given to her by her grandfather Grover Wolfvoice.<sup>6</sup>

Still early in her presidency, Flying is eager to make her mark on the college community. "I get to pave a new path," Flying shared. "My heart is invested in seeing my community flourish. Seeing my students grow into their own — in their leadership, in their culture, in their identity and sense of what's possible for our community. I think about my own family's background — through the boarding schools, through Indian relocation...it's a big deal that I'm here. But I try not to get caught up in it because this job is about the work of educating students."

As she took over the presidency, President Flying made a commitment to strengthen CDKC's partnership with their primary K-12 partner the Northern Cheyenne Tribal School in an effort to help all students who enter the college become college ready. At the same time, Flying knew that the college also needed to change in important ways so that it could transform into a "student-ready" college.

Although the Dull Knife faculty and staff are made up of talented professionals, Flying acknowledges that many do not share the Indigenous identity of their student population. She explains that, as the college was forming, leaders needed to hire non-tribal educators and staff to make sure they had the right disciplinary expertise. Despite this dynamic, Flying makes it clear that, "who we are as Cheyenne people is the pillar and foundation of why the college exists."

President Flying arrived at the college with a big picture vision for helping students gain essential skills by the time they leave the college. "In our culture," Flying explains, "we're almost shamed if we overdo anything. We're taught not to be too showy, too loud, overly dramatic. Because of this, our students, our community becomes afraid to dream big. That is the constant narrative change that I'm doing. I want the college to create a mindset of more possibility." Flying and colleagues work each day to advance this mindset with their student population.

## "If students feel like they belong, they show up"

In 2023, President Flying tapped Communication Arts faculty member Angie Hedges to design a new student success course that would explicitly center the identities of the college's Indigenous student population. Hedges was a natural choice for the role as she had already been leading innovative student support efforts at the college.

Describing her experience when she first started at the college with a role in the tutoring center, Hedges shares, "I noticed that there was no connection. No spots for students to hang out and study. There was none of that — no environment of belonging. My goal from that day was to change that situation. **I rearranged the classroom, set up study sessions, moved a couch into the tutoring center so students could just come and hang out.** I worked together with some other faculty, and we started setting up other environments — rearranging classrooms, space outside of our offices, little study pods. We were trying to let our students know that they belong here."



Angie's efforts to shape the physical space of the college to promote connection is a strategy that can promote belonging.

Although some of these were small changes, Hedges and her colleagues began to see anecdotal evidence that this was having a positive impact on students and increasing their overall engagement. They began to rethink their student onboarding and retention strategies — conversations that eventually led to the design of the student success course.

In Hedges, President Flying had found what may be the most essential ingredient to any college improvement effort: a passionate champion for students. Hedges' deep commitment to her students is apparent in how she speaks about them. "I always describe our students as resilient. Some of them travel 20 miles one way to get here every day and we have a bad pass [the Lane Deer Divide] that they have to go over in the winter. Some of our students also come from pretty rough situations, but they get here. They show up. They're driven. I always emphasize one point when I lead faculty training: if students feel like they belong, they show up. **If faculty and staff make that connection, students show up. They do the work.**" Hedges' grounding in this core belief is spreading at the college and forms the nucleus of their recent efforts to make integrate student identity into their college success course.



This is an example of asset-based thinking. While some faculty, staff or administrators are quick to call out student barriers and deficits, Angie emphasizes that, when students needs are met, they can and will invest in themselves.

## Thinking big, starting small

Flying and Hedges co-constructed a framework for the “College Success Skills” course — a one semester, three credit course offered to students in their first year at the college. The syllabus outlines the course’s core objectives:

**“This course helps students to be successful in school and life by empowering them to make wise choices. It assists students in developing greater confidence and motivation, focusing on self-esteem, self awareness, self-management, interpersonal communication, and emotional intelligence. Students assess interests, learning styles, and career aspirations while learning college customs, reviewing study skills, and exploring their own definitions of a rich, fulfilling life.”**



The course description points to elements that support belonging (class culture), meaning making (culture and mindset) and purpose (assessing interests and career aspirations).

While it does not directly name “belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose,” the concepts outlined in the course description point the way to those constructs. Efforts to help students develop self-esteem, self awareness and self-management and explore college customs are meaning-making strategies. Helping students “assess interests, learning styles and career aspirations” can deepen their sense of purpose.

Perhaps the most noteworthy passage in the course description is a small but critical phrase in the last sentence which explains that students will explore, “their own definitions of a rich, fulfilling life.” This is precisely the kind of self-determined purpose that sits at the heart of the College Success Skills course and its intentions: an invitation for students to sit with and formulate their own definition of who they are and who they want to become.

The College Success Skills course acts as a microcosm of the larger shifts underway at Chief Dull Knife College to center student aspirations, dreams and desires. This approach stands in stark contrast to the history of oppression, displacement genocide and assimilation that forms the backdrop of the Northern Cheyenne and larger Indigenous experience in America. It is also a vital counterpoint to ideologies that view higher education primarily as a workforce development tool to benefit economic growth and the corporate “bottom line.” Flying, Hedges and their colleges, know that higher education is a critical path to living wage jobs and long term economic security. And, through efforts like the College Success Skills Course, they insist that it is also about something bigger. Something intimate, individual and transformative.



The course has only one required text, the fourth edition of Native American College and Career Success, written by a team that includes two Indigenous authors from different tribal affiliations. **The book is organized around critical, college-going skills in a way that embeds and links them to traditional Indigenous knowledge systems and practices — e.g., Dreams Bring Knowledge: Understanding Motivation; Walk with Nature as One: Choosing Your Major; Listen to the Trees Talk: Taking Notes, Writing, and Speaking.** Each week, the course pairs readings from the book with journal prompts, discussion topics and guest speakers who can help ground and contextualize the lessons in the local community.



Organizing the course around traditional Indigenous knowledge systems and practices is a meaning making and belonging strategy.

Hedges, who identifies as White, is intentional about incorporating Indigenous identity into the course and she understands the limits of her own ability to speak to the Northern Cheyenne experience. Hedges explains, “I like to bring elders into the classroom because I am not tribally enrolled and I don’t always feel like I’m the right one to teach the students. So I form partnerships and bring those people in. **I'm working with [a Northern Cheyenne tribal member] right now who is coming in and talking to my class about her growth as a native student, about holding on to your culture, and not being afraid to find your voice and to use it. I think that piece is so important. For students to have space to ask, ‘where do I belong? How do I belong? How do I balance my cultural beliefs with my educational beliefs?’”**



Here, Hedges is facilitating a meaning making opportunity by giving students the chance to make sense of themselves and their community.

While the student success course may not be a new innovation in higher education writ large, structuring a course in this way represents new territory for the Chief Dull Knife community. To ensure that the course was ready to launch, they opted to start small. The pilot version of the course enrolled only eight students. After making modifications, the college is now revising and expanding the offering with hopes to serve a larger number of students in the next academic term. Flying is also planning to test the course in a new setting: as a dual enrollment offering at the Northern Cheyenne Tribal School. The hope is that engaging students in the course content earlier in their journey will help more students pursue college and help smooth their road to completion.

## Moving beyond the “walled garden”

Hedges and Flying are excited by the promise of the course, but know that it can’t remain a “walled garden” of belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose for a small group of students who are lucky enough to get a spot in the course. Deeper, sustainable change will require broader shifts in the college community. Along with a growing number of colleagues, they hold a vision where the same practices emphasized in the student success — centering Indigenous student identity, providing time and space for students to define for themselves what success looks like, establishing linkages between the classroom and community elders and leaders — are emphasized across the college.

If the transformative practices embodied by the College Success Skills course are going to spread at Chief Dull Knife, Flying is betting that it will happen through the college faculty and staff and through the systems that support their development. Flying describes the shift she’s seeking in the faculty role: “it’s not enough for our faculty to be friends with the students. How can they be more than listeners? How can they be constructive contributors to student achievement?”

Among the hurdles that lie ahead: finding professional development that can effectively bring faculty and staff into the work of student-centered transformation. Flying has tried to support professional development in the past, but these efforts have produced less than stellar results: “we paid for an online, self-paced professional development program, but it was hard to integrate into our HR systems and it didn’t really take hold. This has to be a focus for us going forward.” She’s exploring new approaches to faculty development and is committed to making sure everyone on her team is well supported so that they provide the right support for their students.

Flying is “all in” on transformation and fully aware of the challenges inherent in changing behaviors and systems in higher education. “I’m struggling with how to bring the campus along. Some people are fully on board, but there is a certain amount of resistance to change. I know that people can change, but I just have to find that finesse that can help bring about the bigger cultural change.”

Though Chief Dull Knife is starting small, their early steps appear grounded in fertile soil — a thoughtful integration of Indigenous identity with academic programs aligned with student interests and local workforce needs. If given the right nutrients and care, Flying is optimistic that this work will spread and bear fruit, improving the prosperity of students and the local community.



Chief Dull Knife students and faculty

## Gratitude

The authors would like to thank Eva Flying (President of Chief Dull Knife College) and Angie Hedges (STEM Intern Program Coordinator/Writing Coach, Early Childhood Program Coordinator and Communications Arts Faculty) for the generosity of time spent sharing the resources, stories and perspectives used to create this document.

The authors strived to represent the vibrancy of this effort with accuracy. We take full accountability for any errors.

## End notes

<sup>1</sup> Chief Dull Knife College (2023). History. Accessed on August 13, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2024). College Navigator.

<sup>3</sup> Other colleges have been granted this status in the intervening years. As of 2019, congress has defined a total of 36 tribal institutions as land-grant colleges. Croft, Genevieve (2019). The U.S. Land-Grant University System: An Overview.

<sup>4</sup> Chief Dull Knife only receives per-pupil allocations from the State of Montana for its non-tribal students.

<sup>5</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica (2024). Dull Knife. Accessed on August 13, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> American Indian College Fund (2022). Chief Dull Knife College Names Eva M. Flying as New College President. Accessed on August 13, 2024.