

YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 1881

GEOGRAPHY
South Dakota / Native nations

BUDGET
\$5M +

LEADER
Barry Dunn



INNOVATION STORY

No 5

WOKINI INITIATIVE
AT SOUTH DAKOTA
STATE UNIVERSITY

DREAMS OF A NEW BEGINNING

STORY BY
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BROOKINGS

SOUTH
DAKOTA

A program of South Dakota State University, the Wokini Initiative is a catalyst for American Indian student success on campus and Indigenous Nation-building throughout the region — all done in deep collaboration between the university and tribal stakeholders.

Wokini Initiative at South Dakota State University

SDSU acknowledged that it generates revenue from lands once promised to the Lakota and Dakota tribes and moved to redirect those funds toward building economic, cultural and educational opportunities within those communities.

BREAK THROUGH

SDSU's move to direct funds generated from its trust lands to elevate Native American student success is a game-changing innovation, and the Wokini program is creating change of its own through a first-of-its-kind dual focus on student success and tribal relations.



TRUST AND NATION BUILDING

Progress moves at the speed of trust, and for Wokini to thrive, its leaders had to build and strengthen relationships with both its colleagues at the university and tribal leaders in the region — letting both groups know that big changes were on the way.



INNOVATIVE INVESTMENT

In his push to become the first university president in the country to dedicate land grant funds to elevate American Indian student success, Barry Dunn was motivated by moral responsibility and undaunted by the risk of failure.



DREAMS TO COME

Despite its historic launch and early success, the architects of the Wokini Institute don't see it as the finished article. They're working toward big goals for the university and the state: a future where all people have an equal opportunity to access higher education.



RESOURCEFUL



PROACTIVE

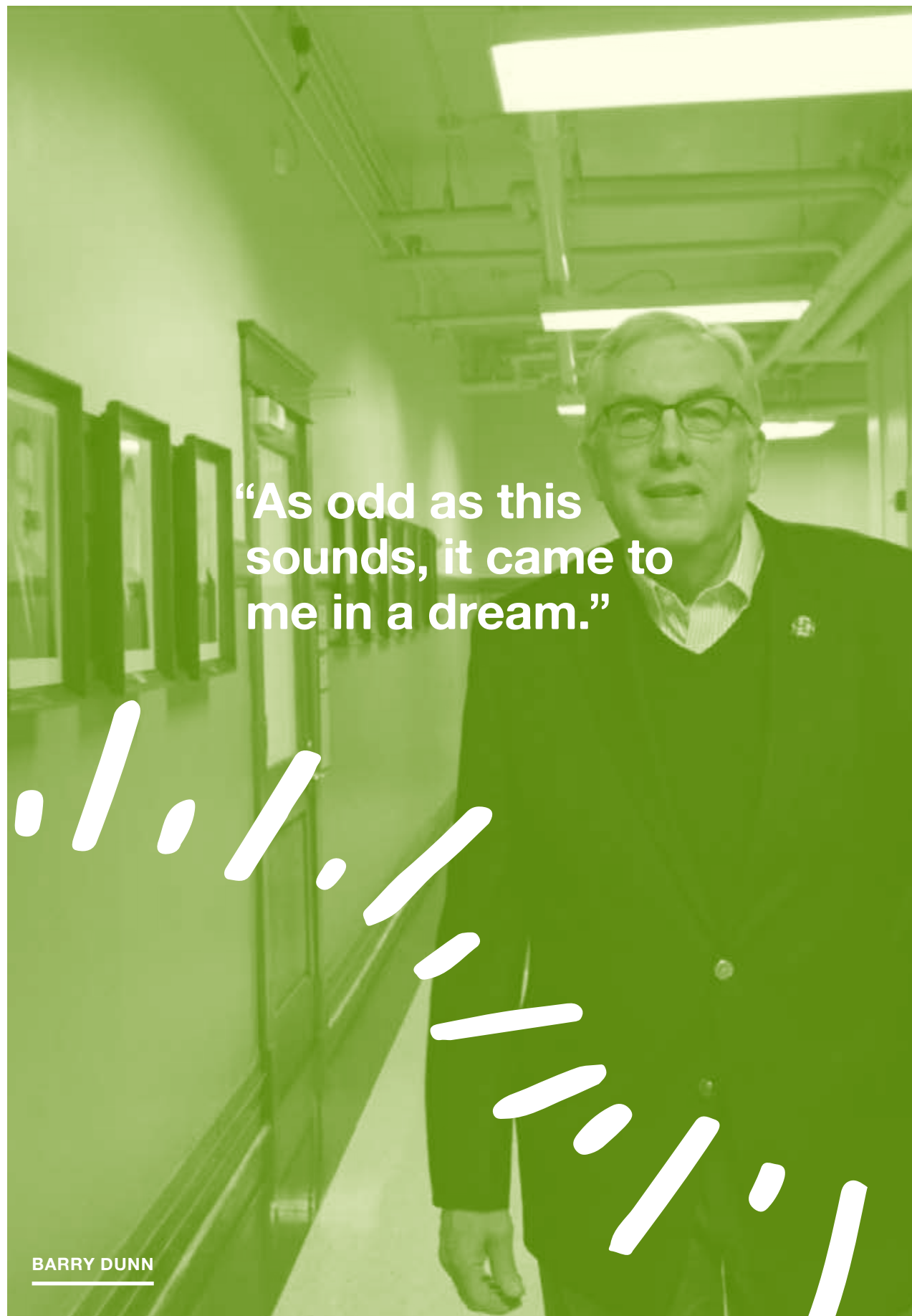


BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

I CAN'T CHANGE THE BEGINNING,
BUT SDSU IS TRYING TO CHANGE
THE ENDING

for Native
students,
their families
and their
communities.

Barry Dunn
SDSU



“As odd as this sounds, it came to me in a dream.”

BARRY DUNN

President Barry Dunn, South Dakota State University’s first Indigenous president, concedes that the unlikely beginning of the Wokini Initiative may have otherworldly origins. Since time immemorial, American Indians have considered dreams sacred and a source of spiritual guidance for the individual and the community.

An enrolled citizen of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Barry spent an important part of his formative years with his maternal grandparents on their ranch in the center of the reservation, where white ranchers and tribal citizens wave at one another as they pass on gravel roads. The vision that guides him is rooted in the desire to manifest an academic future for Indigenous students.

For many Indigenous people, that future can feel distant. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) serve approximately 100,000 community members in various settings to provide access to higher education, preserve Indigenous languages, promote tribal sovereignty and advance economic prosperity for tribal communities. Because Native Americans and Alaska Natives are 1.6 percent of the United States population and only 1 percent of the U.S. undergraduate population (and less than 1 percent of the graduate student population), these students are often forgotten when it comes to data reporting. Unfortunately, the data available indicates that only 25 percent of U.S. Indigenous people have attended some form of postsecondary institution and only 22 percent have earned a degree.

Shana Harming, SDSU director of Wokini and tribal relations, notes that issues of Indigenous invisibility are pervasive. “Our population in South Dakota is only about 10 percent American Indian, but our student population at SDSU has remained between 1 and 2 percent for decades.” Those low numbers mean issues facing Indigenous students are ignored too often.

“ACADEMIA KEEPS US ASIDE OR BELIEVES, ‘Those students don’t matter because they’re so low,’” according to Shana.

But Barry’s dream — both literal and figurative — was to “win some victory for humanity,” in the words of 19th-century education pioneer Horace Mann. To do that, he had to make the most of his relationships, his professional position and his deep understanding of the issues facing Native communities in the region.



TRUST AND NATION-BUILDING

WE AS A UNIVERSITY WERE GOING TO
**do things differently
for American Indian
communities.**

Barry Dunn

South Dakota State University



Launched in January 2017, the Wokini Initiative is a framework designed to support SDSU's Indigenous students for academic success and Indigenous nation-building. The initiative has three core elements: enhancing cultural programming for Indigenous students, offering scholarships to students representing any of the nine tribal nations in South Dakota and building stronger partnerships with other tribal organizations.

For Barry, trust was essential to launching the Wokini Initiative. “I had spoken to frustrated Native families over the years who said that SDSU had failed their students. Early on, there were equal parts excitement and skepticism — but some were waiting for me to break a promise.”

In the state of South Dakota, progress comes as quickly — or as slowly — as trust does. For tribal communities, any interaction with non-Indigenous institutions is replete with historical trauma. From the government-sponsored and church-run boarding schools to the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 to Gov. George S. Mickelson’s declaration of a Year of Reconciliation in 1990 between tribal nations and the state, the trust between any one of the state’s tribal nations and institutes of higher learning is tenuous in ideal circumstances. The building of trust is generational.

Barry recalls an old saying: “You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending,” he says. “This is not about reparations. I can’t change the beginning, but SDSU is trying to change the ending for Native students, their families and their communities.

Barry’s own life experience helped to both motivate him and accelerate the building of trust within the Native community. “I’ve lived on the reservation. I have family from there,” he says.

“I REMEMBER THE FRUSTRATION OF THE CHALLENGES RELATED TO POVERTY.

But I also remember the beauty, the culture. I built trusting relationships over decades.”

Those relationships were the most essential element of ensuring the communities were on board with the plan. “When I came up with this idea, people knew I was a man of my word and could be trusted,” he says.

On campus, Barry garnered support among the university’s key constituent groups. This included the University Budget Oversight Committee, President’s Council, Faculty Senate, Students’ Association, Professional Staff Advisory Council, Civil Service Advisory Council, Tiospaye Council, SDSU Foundation and South Dakota Board of Regents.

He acknowledges that although he had strong relationships with his colleagues at SDSU, his position of power was a vital component of moving Wokini forward. “As a faculty member, as a dean, I couldn’t have done this,” he says. From his very first moments as president, he made it clear that he’d be refocusing the school’s priorities. “At my inauguration, I announced that we as a university were going to do things differently for American Indian communities.”



Many narratives about Native communities and communities of color are focused on what they lack.

How can organizations shift this approach and get creative about elevating and enhancing the resources, assets and strengths already present in the communities they serve?

We have focused on the human potential that exists in every human being rather than the lack of community support and resources. Our mission is to provide people the access to the benefits of higher education, which will provide them the opportunity to change their lives and those in their community. Over time, the focus on education will change the resource map in their communities.

Barry Dunn
SDSU

CHARACTERISTIC NO. 1



INNOVATIVE INVESTMENT

WE HAVE A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY TO
SERVE ALL SOUTH DAKOTANS,
**not just those we
feel comfortable
serving.**

Barry Dunn

South Dakota State University



In South Dakota, under half of adult state residents have completed some form of postsecondary education. For tribal populations, that number is 20 percent. While the nontribal population of the state enjoys a relatively low unemployment rate of 3.3 percent, reservation populations survive amid 70–85 percent unemployment.

While higher education alone may not be the only factor in raising a standard of living, the statistics around education make for simple analysis: as educational attainment rises, unemployment rates go down and earnings go up.

Systemic analysis is just one crucial piece of the Wokini Initiative's early success. A significant amount of leadership was required to distinguish this body of work and ensure it continued past Barry's tenure. "We're very fortunate that President Dunn is making a difference with Wokini at South Dakota State University, but he is also educating other land grant institutions on this very important issue," Shana says.

Barry is the first land grant president in the country to dedicate a portion of the University's land grant funds to elevate American Indian student success. A first-of-its-kind move, Barry's decision was both innovative and poetic.

To help ensure the Wokini would be sustained long term, he chose to base-fund the initiative with income from SDSU's historic land grant lands — 120,000 acres of land the federal government once guaranteed to the Lakota and Dakota tribes, before reclaiming it in 1887 without officially gaining consent from tribal leaders, and then assigning it to SDSU with statehood. "In other words," Barry says, "we are investing annual proceeds from our land grant land into the heirs from whom the land was taken so many years ago."

AND IN SO DOING, WE BEGIN ANEW AND have pledged to provide access to all."



ROLLING HILLS



The Wokini Initiative emerged when leadership took initiative to make a positive change, though it would not have succeeded without community trust and buy-in.

What lessons can other organizations take from that process about how to be proactive about change while still ensuring community voices are heard?

Sadly, the historic paradigm in higher education has all too often been to engage a tribal community in order to achieve a grant or address a mandate. I don't believe this is an effective approach if one truly, and sincerely, wants to drive change. You have to engage, listen, learn, respect, challenge, read and immerse yourself in the history in order to gain a true understanding of a culture, people and religion that is different from your own. Being proactive leads us to the core of the challenges. Small things can have long-term effects and lead to something greater. We cannot simply check the boxes.

Barry Dunn
SDSU

CHARACTERISTIC NO. 2



A STUDENT AT SDSU'S LIBRARY

“This was a big turn for SDSU — it was a reinvestment,” he says. “I had listened to the excuses of why we shouldn’t do it. But this is a land grant institution that is established for all people. In this dream,

I KNEW WE COULD DEDICATE THE LAND GRANT FUNDING TO GET OVER THE HUMP OF EXCUSES, of fear of failure and not trying.”

The acknowledgment that the lands now occupied by SDSU were once treaty territory of Dakota and Lakota people is a milestone in the narrative relationship between South Dakota’s largest academic institution and the state’s nine tribal nations.

“If I had brought that idea and not had my history right, it would have failed,” says Barry. He knew that failure was a real risk — and that even his own job could be at stake — but he didn’t allow fear to stop him.

“I UNDERSTOOD THAT THERE WAS RISK FOR MY PRESIDENCY.

But I also knew that it was my responsibility,” he says.

“It was the right thing to do. I knew where the land came from. I knew the history. I’d heard all the excuses that this university had used to not serve the American Indian people in this state.” Barry’s approach to breaking free from those excuses was to appeal to the values of his colleagues and those of the broader community. “We have a moral responsibility to serve all South Dakotans, not just those we feel comfortable serving,” he says. “I kept hammering away with the facts — the fundamental land grant dialogue from 1862 was about access to public education for all. One just can’t ignore that.”

Shana agrees: “It’s really a movement, and I would say it’s just the beginning. I hope that we continue to not only make a difference and transform things that uplift the university here in the Midwest, but also across the nation.”



DREAMS TO COME



SDSU MADE IT SEEM LIKE
**they wanted people
like me to come to
their school.**

Traelene Fallis

Student, South Dakota State University



For Shana, the daily work of supporting, advancing and celebrating the Wokini Initiative is both exciting and challenging. She looks forward especially to the opportunity to expand the vision. “Right now, I’m boots on the ground, rolling up my sleeves and in there doing the work. But I’m also the administrator, creating the framework and narratives in this dual role,” she says.

In a time and place where abundance continues to fuel the core of the Wokini vision, Shana believes a crucial future step will be launching the Wokini professional development series currently being created for SDSU's staff and faculty. The series will provide faculty and staff with a broader understanding of American Indian history, culture and contemporary issues facing American Indians and tribal communities.

Additionally, the professional development series will feature online modules, campus seminars and a place-based workshop, including traveling to tribal communities and culturally significant locations across and bordering South Dakota.

All of these enhancements will serve to get SDSU and Wokini closer to their long-term goal: having the same proportion of Indigenous students in the university student body as Indigenous people in the general population of South Dakota and improving Indigenous retention and graduation rates.

The long-term, big-picture future that Shana and Barry envision is simple and powerful:

"A SOUTH DAKOTA WHERE ALL PEOPLE HAVE AN equal opportunity to access the benefits of higher education."

The best may be yet to come, but the initiative is already making a real impact on livelihoods in the region. SDSU junior Traelene Fallis recalls learning about Wokini as a senior at Crow Creek Tribal School on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation. "A student recruiter representative came to my high school and really sparked my interest," she says. SDSU's intentional outreach made a lasting impression: "It had a big impact on my decision to be in school. No other colleges came. SDSU made it seem like they wanted people like me to come to their school."

And as Traelene navigates the challenges of university life, Wokini is a major ally in her corner.

"THERE ARE SOME TIMES WHEN IT BECOMES STRESSFUL — THAT'S PART OF COLLEGE. But I have a big support system here."



Many of the relationships that helped make the Wokini Initiative possible existed before the idea to start the initiative.

How can leaders and organizations ensure they're building the kind of authentic, nontransactional relationships that can be essential when an opportunity arises?

You don't build a relationship by visiting the reservation or tribal college when you are getting ready to apply for a grant. It is important to have built the relationships long before you engage in problem-solving, grant writing or new initiatives. SDSU has a history of developing positive working relationships with several tribal colleges. We built relationships by assisting with accreditation processes and attending a variety of events. We have a history of active involvement and participation by myself and previous presidents and university leaders. We have attended ceremonies out of respect and have sent congratulatory notes in honor of a variety of achievements. My relationship with Sinte Gleska University began over 40 years ago when I was a student there and my wife was a teacher. This bond has continued throughout my leader tenure at South Dakota State University.

**Barry Dunn
SDSU**