



Tohono O'odham Community College the Nation's Only Tribal College Among First 14 Institutions to Earn New Carnegie Sustainability Classification

TOCC selected in selective inaugural group recognized for integrating sustainability across education, operations and community engagement grounded in Tohono O'odham Himdag.

SELLS, Ariz. — Sept. 22, 2026

Tohono O'odham Community College (TOCC) has earned the new Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability, becoming one of the first 14 colleges and universities in the nation to receive the designation — and the only Tribal College recognized through the 2025 pilot program.

The new national classification recognizes colleges and universities that demonstrate how sustainability is integrated throughout the institution, including curriculum, research, operations, career preparation and community engagement. TOCC will retain the classification for six years, through 2033.

For TOCC, the designation recognizes the College's Indigenous approach to sustainability, unique to the others receiving the Sustainability classification. The College, chartered by the Tohono O'odham Nation in 1998, is grounded in the Tohono O'odham Himdag (way of life) from which the College's curriculum, programs, policies, and institutional practices are formed, developed, and implemented.

"This recognition affirms the College's foundation, and honors our ancestral understanding of sustainability," stated Dr. Stephen Schoonmaker, TOCC President. "Cem hekid 'am o himad," an O'odham phrase meaning 'always will continue' encapsulates our distinctive ways of knowing. Rather than viewing sustainability as a means to prolong the continued extracting of resources from the land, TOCC's efforts are embedded in recognition of, and to perpetuate, the harmonious and life-sustaining relationship we have had for millennia with the land, animals, and environment. For us, sustainability is holistic and inclusive of our fundamental mission, which includes the reclamation and revitalization of the O'odham language, and to protect and pass on the Tohono O'odham culture as an integral part of cem hekid 'am o himad. As the only Tribal College recognized by Carnegie at this time offers us an important opportunity to

bring this Indigenous perspective into a national conversation about what sustainability can mean in higher education.”

TOCC recognizes sustainability as encompassing the preservation of O’odham language and culture. Classified as endangered by UNESCO, the language embodies knowledge of seasonal cycles, dryland agriculture, and the responsible stewardship of water and land. TOCC incorporates O’odham language and cultural principles into academic courses, sustainability initiatives, Himdag-based graduation requirements, and even campus signage. Through the O’odham Language Center (O’odham Ñiokĩ Ki:), we collaborate with Head Start and K–12 programs, and other O’odham speaking tribes; lead cohorts to prepare future O’odham language educators; and utilize advanced technologies to record, transcribe, archive, and document the O’odham language.

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability is hosted by the University of Colorado Boulder in partnership with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education. The classification takes a comprehensive approach to sustainability, looking beyond individual projects to examine how sustainability is integrated across an institution.

“The first group of inaugural institutions help bring this new classification to life,” said Timothy F.C. Knowles, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. “We’re proud to recognize their leadership and the many ways they are advancing sustainability across their campuses and communities.”

TOCC joins Pima Community College and the University of Arizona in receiving this classification – the only state to have this many colleges and universities recognized. Located in Southern Arizona, the three institutions have opportunities to collaborate while contributing their distinct missions, communities, and areas of expertise to sustainability efforts. “We see this recognition as a means to share sustainability knowledge and experience with other higher education institutions throughout Arizona and with Tribal Colleges and Universities throughout Indian Country”, remarked President Schoonmaker.

TOCC has also accepted an invitation to serve on the Carnegie Sustainability National Advisory Committee, where it will help shape the criteria and process for future application cycles.

“TOCC did not just earn this classification; we helped build it,” said Dr. Adrian Quijada, Director of TOCC’s Land Grant Office of Sustainability, and lead writer of the college’s application. “What sets TOCC apart from these first 14 Sustainability Institutions is that, for us, sustainability means sustaining the O’odham culture along with the land for the knowledge to live in this desert is carried in the language. This classification places a Tribal College from the Sonoran Desert on the same national list as major research universities, and it validates that our work, grounded in Himdag, meets the highest national standards. That recognition strengthens our position when we compete for

federal and private funding, and every grant we earn comes back to the Nation as programs, jobs and opportunities for our students.”

"TOCC shows what it looks like when sustainability grows out of culture, language and a deep relationship with place," said Brennen Jensen, Director of Engagement and Resilience at Blue Strike Environmental. "It was an honor to support a Tribal College that is helping shape sustainability efforts for the rest of the Nation."

TOCC's participation also places the College within a growing national conversation about the role higher education can play in climate resilience, workforce development and community engagement. The American Council on Education and Second Nature are developing resources highlighting sustainability work and leadership from institutions that participated in the Carnegie pilot, with the goal of sharing practices and lessons with colleges and universities across the country.

The 14 institutions receiving the Carnegie Elective Classification for Sustainability through the 2025 pilot are: Bennett College, Carleton College, Clarkson University, George Mason University, Mt. San Antonio College, Pima Community College, Tohono O'odham Community College, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, University of Arizona, University of California, Merced, University of Idaho, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

These 14 institutions will become part of the full inaugural cohort when additional institutions completing the first full classification cycle are announced in June 2027.

About Tohono O'odham Community College

Tohono O'odham Community College is a Tribal College chartered by the Tohono O'odham Nation and located on the Tohono O'odham Nation in southern Arizona. Grounded in the O'odham Himdag, TOCC provides higher education opportunities that support students, strengthen communities, preserve and advance Tohono O'odham culture and knowledge, and contribute to the future of the Tohono O'odham Nation. Tohono O'odham Community College is an equal opportunity institution and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, or any other status protected by applicable law in its programs, activities, admissions, or employment.

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