ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITY IN NATIVE AMERICAN NATIONS: A NEW DOMAIN FOR GEM STUDIES (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

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Principal Topic

Drawing on institutional theory, this study examines entrepreneurial attitudes and early stage entrepreneurial activities within American Indian nations. Early stage entrepreneurial activity is particularly critical as more American Indian tribes gain enhanced legitimacy as sovereign nations engaged in nation-building processes (Cornell & Kalt, 2007). A growing number of these nations recognize the need to encourage and facilitate private economic development among their members. This study examines entrepreneurial attitudes, aspirations, and early stage entrepreneurial activity within American Indian nations.

Method

The GEM Adult Population Survey was adapted to a pen-and-paper questionnaire with wording adapted to reflect the American Indian context. Participants include members of American Indian tribes and are adult members of each tribe as determined by random sample based on the method by which each tribe communicates to its membership. Identification of Indian nations to participate in the project was assisted by the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development. Information on institutional factors such as regulative rules, government policies and programs, infrastructure, and cultural norms was separately obtained from tribal leaders in each American Indian nation.

Results and Implications

By benchmarking levels of entrepreneurship at the tribal nation level, the study offers rich potential for ongoing tracking of entrepreneurial development and for correlating aspects of tribal governance, infrastructure, culture and other variables with levels of entrepreneurship. The results indicate that within these nations attitudes toward entrepreneurship are mixed. While the majority of citizens within the tribes believe that successful entrepreneurs have a high level of status and respect, they do not believe that starting a new business is a desirable career choice. Yet, a large percentage of tribal citizens are nascent entrepreneurs engaged in early stage entrepreneurial activities. High rates of nascent entrepreneurship may indicate a critical point for governance institutions to optimize programs and policies that facilitate entrepreneurship within American Indian nations, and suggestions are made in this regard. American Indian nations may be at such a critical point where the actions of their governing institutions can meaningfully influence whether their citizens view entrepreneurship as a desirable career choice, and whether many of the nascent entrepreneurs successfully establish businesses.

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