



Supporting Postsecondary Education Pathways for Rural Tribal Communities: **Challenges and Opportunities**

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Together, these contributions have created a comprehensive and meaningful landscape scan that reflects the resilience, strength, and potential of Indigenous communities. We hope this document serves as a catalyst for positive change and continues to inspire collaborative efforts toward equitable postsecondary education pathways for Native American and Indigenous youth.

About the Author

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Dr. Prescott's words and thoughts are her own and do not represent an official position by her employer The University of Texas System.

Executive Summary

Within the framework of Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS), the Opportunity Youth Forum, and Fresh Tracks, efforts are being made to address the myriad challenges faced by Native American and Indigenous youth in accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education. Systemic barriers, deeply rooted in historical injustices have left lasting impacts on Native communities, creating intergenerational trauma and significant educational disparities. Socioeconomic disadvantages, including financial hardship, housing and food insecurity, further complicate their educational journeys. Geographic isolation also plays a critical role, as many Native students live in remote areas with limited access to quality education, digital infrastructure, and essential support services, exacerbating the existing inequities.

Cultural disconnects within educational institutions lead to feelings of isolation and a disconnection from traditional knowledge systems, which are crucial for the holistic development of Native students. Personal challenges are also significant, with Native youth experiencing higher rates of mental health issues, substance abuse, and suicide compared to the national averages. These challenges are compounded by lower educational attainment rates, with only 15% of Native residents aged 25 and older holding a bachelor's degree or higher, starkly contrasting with the national average of 33%.

While the challenges are substantial, promising opportunities exist to strengthen the postsecondary and workforce pipeline for Indigenous youth. Through a multifaceted approach that addresses systemic barriers, incorporates culturally responsive practices, and provides tailored support systems, tribal communities, higher education, philanthropy, and other key stakeholders can work together to ensure equitable access to and success in higher education and meaningful employment for Indigenous youth.

Creating postsecondary and workforce pathways that are aligned and feature many on-ramps is essential for addressing the unique cultural and economic needs of tribal communities. These pathways should provide multiple entry points, allowing students to seamlessly move between education and employment opportunities. By tailoring these pathways to reflect the cultural values and economic realities of the tribal community, communities can ensure that students receive relevant and meaningful education and training. This approach not only enhances the employability of Native youth but also supports the sovereignty and economic development of tribal communities, fostering a sustainable future where Indigenous traditions and modern opportunities coexist in mutually beneficial and complementary ways.

Philanthropy, as emphasized by AIFCS's initiatives, can also play a vital role in this endeavor by directly addressing the financial hurdles, supporting the creation of culturally responsive education, investing in tribal colleges and universities, empowering community-based support programs, and advocating for systemic reforms that create a more equitable educational landscape. By combining targeted funding, collaboration, and advocacy, philanthropy can be a transformative force in dismantling systemic barriers and paving the way for a more inclusive and successful educational journey for Native youth.

Within Indigenous communities lies a deep well of resilience and cultural strength. Native and Indigenous youth are increasingly asserting their agency in this movement by reclaiming their ancestral knowledge and weaving it into contemporary pathways, forging new avenues in fields like environmental science, education, and entrepreneurship. This unique blend of tradition and innovation empowers Indigenous youth to become thriving contributors and creators within their communities and beyond, thereby strengthening tribal sovereignty.



Introduction

Native and Indigenous opportunity youth – those between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor employed – occupy and navigate a complex landscape of challenges and possibilities. Systemic inequities often leave them with limited access to quality education, career guidance, and culturally relevant resources. The legacy of colonialism can further compound these difficulties, fostering feelings of isolation and disconnection from Indigenous traditional knowledge systems.¹

Higher education enrollment in the general population has been declining over the past decade but has recently shown signs of stabilization and potential growth, mostly due to gains at community colleges.² Despite these marginal positive signs, the long-term outlook remains cautious due to the anticipated “enrollment cliff.” Native and Indigenous youth in North America, however, continue to confront significant obstacles in accessing and succeeding in higher education at both two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions. Systemic barriers rooted in history and ongoing societal issues, cultural disconnects, financial constraints, and mental health challenges all contribute to these difficulties. This report presents data on this set of systemic barriers and provides recommendations to transform these systems and increase their postsecondary completion and connection to meaningful employment.

While addressing the range of systemic barriers requires commitment from sectors other than just higher education, significant hope lies in creating culturally responsive educational environments. This involves weaving Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and teaching styles into the curriculum and pedagogy, while simultaneously increasing the presence of Indigenous faculty and staff who can serve as role models and mentors.

There is no one single sacred medicine that can cure all the challenges facing tribal communities and Native youth. Success is – and will be – the result of the compound effect of good strategies and respectful partners.

¹ “Indigenous traditional knowledge” refers to the cumulative and holistic body of knowledge, practices, and beliefs that Indigenous peoples have developed over generations through their close relationship with their natural environment.

² National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2024, May 22). Current term enrollment estimates: Spring 2024. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>.

Approach

This report features a scan of publicly available data demonstrating the challenges that Native and Indigenous youth experience in higher education. In addition, this landscape scan focuses on postsecondary efforts that specifically serve Native American students who are first-time college students, as well as other youth and young adults from tribal communities.

The landscape scan combines a targeted literature review with policy and practice information drawn from the lived experience of tribal communities across the United States to establish a shared understanding of the current scale and effectiveness of postsecondary pathway strategies for Native American youth and young adults and provide recommendations for continued support and funding.

This scan is neither a program evaluation nor a state-by-state comparison. Rather, it represents a baseline description of existing practices and student outcomes (where possible) to better understand how Native students experience postsecondary pathway programs and policies, and of general outcomes for Native students seeking postsecondary credentials. It also includes general, policy, best practice, and funding/philanthropic recommendations, and, finally a Woven Pathways Framework outlining Indigenous-centered postsecondary-to-meaningful-employment pathways.

The learning questions that guide the scope of this scan are:

- What are the data and policy landscapes affecting Indigenous student success and higher education's ability to support Indigenous students, particularly those in rural areas?
- What are the key challenges facing Indigenous youth in accessing and thriving in higher education?
- Where are opportunities to strengthen the postsecondary pipeline for Indigenous youth, particularly those in rural areas?
- What role has Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS)'s investment in Indigenous communities played in furthering postsecondary opportunities for Indigenous youth?
- What role can philanthropy play in capitalizing on those opportunities?

TERMINOLOGY: In the following pages, the terms “American Indian and Alaska Native” (AI/AN), will collectively be referred to as “Native Americans”. While all AI/AN can be categorized as “Indigenous,” not all individuals categorized as Indigenous count as AI/AN in many data sets. Though these terms are often used interchangeably, we acknowledge that they may not fully capture the diversity of Native identities and that not all individuals may identify with each term. This report uses an inclusive definition when data were available, but in many cases data were only available for AI/AN-alone populations. Additional nuances and complexities around data on AI/AN youth are discussed on page 10.

PART I: Systemic Barriers to Access and Success



Youth Voices: Jemez Pueblo and Kawaiola Opportunity Youth

“Getting an education helped me become independent, smarter, confident, and happy.”

“Education is a fundamental aspect of my life; I love to learn. Keeping this mindset has already taken me to places I would not think to be a part of. It is because of education that feeds my desire to become a teacher and positive role model. I hold schooling to a high degree, which earned me to be the Salutatorian of my graduating class. With education, I know I will go far in life.”

“Education had empowered me to do more to help my community and be more proactive in the world as a whole. It has also given me the confidence to advocate for a seat at the table when large-scale discussions are happening.”

“Getting education after high school has transformed my life because it has helped me learn to be on my own, take care of myself and learn how to depend on myself. Classes that I have taken were eye opening, and I am still learning how to be more responsible and discipline myself.”

“Getting an education has improved my life by showing me how college would be like. Teachers showing right methods of studying so I have different techniques of studying when I get to college.”

“Today I figured out what I want to do... I have a different perspective. ...I know that I can fail but it's how I push through the barriers and challenges in life that I'm learning from this program.”

“A lot of [what we learn] has to do with our everyday life. For example, farming: How you nurture a plant and how you take care of it is how you treat yourself. Whatever energy you put into that plant is how it's going to grow.”

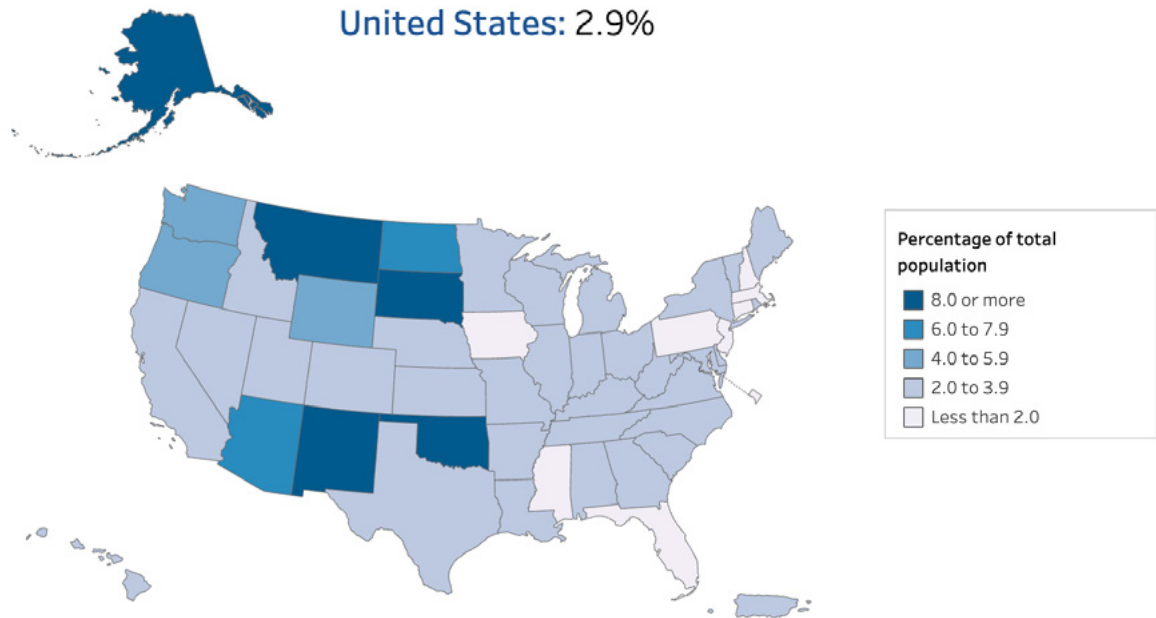
“I want to learn our ancestors' ways, to know how to take care of our water, our land, how to take care of our people.”

“[My educational experiences] improved my life because I was learning how to deal with taxes and I got to use the skills I was taught from the education.”

Data Contexts

Percent American Indian and Alaska Native Alone or in Combination, Total Population by State: 2020

United States: 2.9%



Native and Indigenous Population Overview

American Indian and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) constitute 3% of the total US population, according to the 2020 US Census.³ This includes individuals who identify as AI/AN alone or in combination with one or more other Census-defined racial groups. Though this number represents an overall increase from 2010 to 2020 due to enhanced efforts at reporting design and process, the 2020 figure is still believed by some, including the Brookings Institution, to be underestimated.⁴ Methods of identifying and reporting AI/AN populations vary and can create inconsistencies as the ways in which individuals are categorized across data sets may differ based on the ways race or ethnicity questions are answered or defined.⁵

The 2020 Census reveals that almost 87% of those who are classified as AI/AN live outside of tribal statistical areas, meaning only 13% live on reservations or other trust lands.⁶

³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2021, August). Improved race-ethnicity measures reveal United States population much more multiracial. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html>

⁴ In 1990, the census data used three separate race categories (American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut), while in 2000, the three categories were combined into one group called American Indian and Alaska Native, with an option to write in a tribal affiliation, and included Aztec and Maya as examples. Maxim, R., Sanchez, G. R., & Huyser, K. R. (2023, March 30). Why the federal government needs to change how it collects data on Native Americans. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-the-federal-government-needs-to-change-how-it-collects-data-on-native-americans/>; Ogunwole, S. U. (2002, February). Census 2000 brief: The American Indian and Alaska Native population: 2000. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2002/dec/c2kbr01-15.html>

⁵ Santos, J., & Tachine, A. R. (2024, May). *Layers of identity: Rethinking American Indian and Alaska Native data collection in higher education*. Institute for Higher Education Policy

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). 2020 AIAN wall map. https://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/DC2020/AIANWall2020/2020_AIAN_US.pdf; and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health. (n.d.). American Indian/Alaska Native Health. <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/american-indianalaska-native-health>

According to the 2020 Census, approximately 22% of Native Americans reside in rural areas versus 18% of white Americans, 10% of Black Americans, and 7% of Hispanic or Latino Americans. Over half (51%) of the “American Indian alone” population (includes individuals who gave one response in the race category) lived in five states; Oklahoma had the largest American Indian alone population (14.2%), followed by Arizona (13%), California (10%), New Mexico (9%) and Texas (5%).⁷ Nearly a third (33%) of the Latin American Indian alone (classified as solely AI/AN in racial category, but Latin American or Hispanic ethnicity) population lived in California, followed by Texas (12%), New York (8%), Illinois (6%) and Florida (5%).

Native American students living in or near tribal reservations face many struggles also shared by rural students in general, such as having to move away from family support systems to attend postsecondary institutions, lack of economic opportunity to return to rural/tribal homes after college if they wanted to return to family and tribal community, and the fact that many, if not most, colleges are located in areas where the cost of living is much higher compared to that of the students’ home area. Rural and tribal students also frequently lack access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses and to adequate special education support. In general, rural communities face compounded issues that impact education and workforce opportunities.⁸

The Navajo Nation made up the largest share of the American Indian alone population (14.6%), followed by Cherokee (10.0%), Choctaw (3.2%) and the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina (2.5%).⁹ Native Americans represent more than 600 tribal Nations, 175 languages,¹⁰ and 574 federally recognized Tribes¹¹ with nation-to-nation relationships with the US government, and there are many more that still operate as tribal communities but have lost federal recognition through the treaty process and federal termination-policies.

AI/AN 16- to 24-year olds are **more likely to be out of work and out of school** than any other demographic group

Opportunity Youth

Opportunity youth are individuals aged 16-24 who are neither in the workforce nor attending an institution of education. Their lack of access to education, not just postsecondary but also K12 (particularly high school), and employment creates barriers to both their personal development and their ability to contribute to society. To maximize our societal potential, it’s crucial to provide these young people with meaningful opportunities to engage in community building and personal growth.

In the U.S., one in nine young people are opportunity youth, totaling to at least 5 million opportunity youth nationally. For the Native American populations, this is nearly one in four. According to Measure of America’s 2023 report, the Native American youth disconnection rate is 23.5%, which was the highest of the United States’ five major racial and ethnic groups.¹² Native American teen boys and young men have the highest rate of any

⁷ Sánchez-Rivera, A. I., Jacobs, P., & Spence, C. (2023, October). A look at the largest American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes and villages in the nation. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/10/2020-census-dhc-a-ai-an-population.html>

⁸ California Center for Rural Policy, Humboldt Area Foundation, & Crane Conso. (2023). Postsecondary Pathways in the North Coast. California Center for Rural Policy.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/10/2020-census-dhc-a-ai-an-population.html>

¹⁰ Native Americans in Philanthropy. (2020, November 1). Native American Heritage Month: Fast facts about Indigenous peoples. <https://nativephilanthropy.org/blog/2020/11/01/native-american-heritage-month-fast-facts-about-Indigenous-peoples>

¹¹ Bureau of Indian Affairs. (n.d.). Tribal leaders directory. <https://www.bia.gov/service/tribal-leaders-directory>

¹² This report does not indicate if these data were only available for AI/AN-alone populations or if this percentage is more inclusive of Native and Indigenous categories.

race/gender combination (24%), and Native American girls and young women have the highest rate amongst all females (23%).¹³

Data on Barriers to Access and Success

Native Americans often remain invisible in datasets due to systemic underrepresentation and the lumping of diverse groups into broad categories, which erases distinct cultural identities.

For example, in many state data sets like in Texas, higher education institutions collect demographic data including race and ethnicity from students, who can identify with multiple racial categories and separately declare Hispanic or Latino ethnicity. Students identifying as Hispanic or Latino are classified under this category for demographic reporting, regardless of their racial choices. Students choosing multiple races including Black or African American are reported as such, unless they also identify as Hispanic or Latino. American Indian or Alaskan Native (AI/AN) and multi-racial students not identifying as Black or African American are grouped into an “Other Races” category along with unknown races. This method of categorization effectively and realistically erases the identity of American Indian or Alaskan Native students, leading to underrepresentation. According to some estimates, this current data practice can lead to three-quarters or more of AI/AN being classified in a different group, likely Latino/Hispanic or “two or more races.”¹⁴ The same holds true for federal data sets. This report uses an inclusive definition when data are available, but in many cases data were only available for AI/AN-alone populations.

This invisibility can lead to inadequate resource allocation and policy planning, resulting in fewer academic and support opportunities tailored to the needs of Native American and Indigenous students. Consequently, this can perpetuate cycles of educational disparities and hinder the progress toward equity in higher education and, subsequently, in obtaining high paid, in-demand career paths.

It is also critical to note that American Indians and Native Alaskans are the only “race” that is also a political identity, a fact that greatly complicates matters of data collection and classification.



Up to 70% of Indigenous students in U.S. public schools are not represented in data reporting or analysis.

Indigenous Students Count: A Landscape Analysis of American Indian and Alaska Native Student Data in U.S. K-12 Public Schools, Indigenous Education State Leaders Network and American Institutes for Research

³² Lewis, K. (2023). Ensuring an equitable recovery: Addressing Covid-19's impact on education. Social Science Research Council, Measure of America.

¹⁴ Maxim, R. (2024, May 3). Our revised race standards still fall short for Indigenous Americans. The Hill. <https://thehill.com/opinion/civil-rights/4639408-our-revised-race-standards-still-fall-short-for-Indigenous-americans/>

Academic Barriers in K-12

The National Indian Education Study (2019)¹⁵, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)¹⁶, found that Native American students in grades 4 and 8, were performing two to three grades lower than their white counterparts in both reading and mathematics. Additionally, these students were twice as likely to leave school prematurely compared to their white peers.

In 2007, the National Caucus of Native American State Legislators (NCNASL) reported, “The state of education in our nation’s K-12 schools for Native students is distressing.” By 2020, improvement in the educational situation for AI/AN students had not progressed sufficiently, with many of the concerning patterns identified in the NCNASL report continuing to present day.¹⁷ This academic “unpreparedness”, which is caused in many cases through systemic barriers, creates and amplifies additional hurdles to accessing and thriving in postsecondary education.

K-12 Teachers

According to the NCES, Native students are less likely to have teachers of the same racial and ethnic background, with AI/AN students underrepresented among teachers compared to their student populations.

In majority-AI/AN schools, 61% of teachers are white, while only 29% are AI/AN.¹⁸ Previous research indicates students tend to achieve better academically when their teachers share the same race or ethnicity, as these teachers can act as role models, mentors, advocates, and/or cultural translators.¹⁹



By 2031, **72% of jobs nationwide require some postsecondary education and/or Training**

Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023

¹⁵ Rampey, B. D., Faircloth, S. C., Whorton, R. P., & Deaton, J. (2021). National Indian Education Study 2019 (NCES 2021-018). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2021018>; and National Conference of State Legislatures. (n.d.). Striving to achieve: Helping Native American students succeed. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/documents/statetribe/strivingtoachieve.pdf>

¹⁶ The National Indian Education Study (NIES) is conducted under the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to offer detailed insights into the experiences and performance of 4th and 8th grade AI/AN students. It supplies tribal leaders, educators, policymakers, and researchers with dependable data on AI/AN youth education.

¹⁷ Cai, J. (2020, December 1). The condition of Native American students: This significant minority student group continues to struggle. And, National School Boards Association. (2020). The condition of Native American students. Retrieved from <https://www.nsba.org/ASBJ/2020/December/condition-native-american-students>.

¹⁸ National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). Public school teacher data file, 2017–18 & Race and ethnicity of public school teachers and their students. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103/index.asp>

¹⁹ Egalite, A. J., Kisida, B., & Winters, M. A. (2014). Representation in the classroom: The effect of own-race teacher assignment on student achievement. Program on Education Policy and Governance Working Paper. ERIC.

Higher Education Enrollment

Though the Native population has increased significantly from 2000 to today, Native student enrollment into postsecondary remains relatively static. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, in Fall 2021, Native American students constituted only 0.7% of all postsecondary enrollment, highlighting a significant disparity when compared to their representation in the overall US population. Further, only 28% of 18–24-year-old Native Americans enrolled in postsecondary education, compared to 38% of the overall US population. Native American enrollment experienced a sharp 38% decline from Fall 2010 to Fall 2021, including a 40% decrease in undergraduate enrollment and an 18% decrease in graduate program enrollment, indicating a concerning trend in higher education participation among Native American students.²⁰ The disparities in higher education enrollment among Native and Indigenous youth suggest persistent barriers to access.

Financial Aid, Debt, and Hidden Costs

According to the 2019-2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS:20), 54% of Native American/Indigenous students received some form of federal financial aid in the 2019-20 academic year, compared to 55% of all students.²¹ The National Study on College Affordability for Indigenous Students conducted by the National Native Scholarship Providers (NNSP) in 2022, indicated that more than half of the study's Indigenous respondents reported college debt balances at \$20,000 or less, 64% of all Indigenous student college debt was in student loans.²² The NPSAS:20 revealed that Native students received the lowest average amount of federal financial aid than any other racial/ethnic group, which could indicate an aversion to taking out loans, as the financial need does exist in many Native communities. This same study indicated 34% of participants took out subsidized loans, 30% took out unsubsidized loans, 25% accrued credit card debt, and 11% took out private loans. The high numbers of unsubsidized loans, credit cards, and private loans indicate there was still considerable unmet need after scholarships, tuition waivers, and even subsidized loans. Though the report focused on affordability and financial costs, it also surfaced a powerful finding regarding hidden costs: that of time. **Time can be the cost that is least easily afforded by Indigenous students who play integral roles in their family, culture, community, and ceremonies. There is a hidden burden and stress on Indigenous students whose absence requires those roles be redistributed to others in their family and community.**²³

Several states and universities offer tuition waivers to Native American and Indigenous students, though their requirements differ (i.e. residency, tribal affiliation, tribal citizenship documentation, and academic requirements). Native tuition waivers aim to provide financial support for American Indian and Alaska Native students by covering tuition costs, thereby promoting access to higher education. They have been effective in increasing enrollment and visibility of Native students at participating institutions. However, these waivers often fall short by not covering additional costs such as fees, room and board, and books, which can still pose significant financial barriers for students, limiting the overall impact on retention and graduation rates.²⁴

²⁰ Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2023, November). Native American students in higher education fact sheet. <https://pnpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/NativeAmericanFactSheet-Nov-2023.pdf>

²¹ Cameron, M., Johnson, R., Lacy, T.A., Wu, J., Siegel, P., Holley, J., and Wine, J. (2023). 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20): First Look at Student Financial Aid Estimates for 2019–20 (NCES 2023-466). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved 5/14/24 from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2023466>.

²² American Indian College Fund & National Native Scholarship Providers. (2022). *The national study on college affordability for Indigenous students*. Retrieved from https://issuu.com/collegefund/docs/nnsf_college_affordability_-_final. This comprehensive study, supported by the Lumina Foundation, addresses critical aspects of college affordability impacting Indigenous students and provides actionable insights and recommendations for educational institutions.

²³ AICF, *College Affordability*. P. 19.

²⁴ Minthorn, R. Z., & Youngbull, N. R. (2023). *National Native Tuition Waiver Study: A report to the Region 16 Comprehensive Center*. Region 16 Comprehensive Center.

Retention/Completion

The Census' American Community Survey from 2021 reveals that among American Indian or Alaska Native residents aged 25 and older, just 15% have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. While this represents an increase from 13% in 2010, it still lags behind the national average of 33%.²⁵

As shown in the chart below using recently published 2022 data from the Census, postsecondary enrollment and completion rates are lowest for AI/AN and Pacific Islanders.²⁶

According to the 2023 Congressional Research Service brief on postsecondary education of Native Americans, the percentage of high school completers ages 25 and up who had enrolled in postsecondary education at some point in their lives was lowest for people identifying as AI/AN (60%), Pacific Islander (58%), and then Hispanic (62%). Similarly, the percentage of this population who completed a postsecondary degree (associate's, bachelor's, or higher) at some point in their lives was lowest for people identifying as AI/AN (33%) and Pacific Islander (32%).²⁸

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)

The postsecondary situation looks much more promising when looking at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). Completion rates for AI/AN students are higher at TCUs than non-TCUs, with 86% of TCU students completing their respective programs (including bachelor's, associate's, master's, and certificate programs).²⁹ There are 37 TCUs with more than 75 sites in the United States, most located in the Midwest and Western regions. TCUs primarily serve Native American students, but they are open to all students regardless of their background. TCUs were established to provide higher education opportunities to American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations and are located mainly on or near reservations to ensure accessibility for Native students and are therefore primarily rural institutions, and generally provide two-degrees.

Figure 1. Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over Who Have Completed High School, by Race/Ethnicity, 2022

Sorted by percentage of degree completers

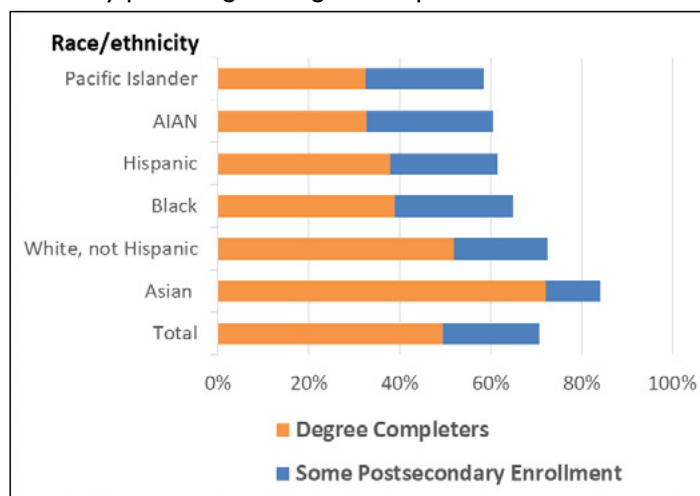


Figure 1. Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over Who have Completed High School, by Race/Ethnicity, 2022 Sorted by percentage of degree completers Source: Table prepared by CRS using U.S. Census Bureau, "Sex by Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over," American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table series B15002, 2022 (accessed on October 6, 2023). Notes: AIAN is American Indian/Alaska Native.

²⁵ Minthorn, R. Z., & Youngbull, N. R. (2023). *National Native Tuition Waiver Study: A report to the Region 16 Comprehensive Center*. Region 16 Comprehensive Center.

²⁶ Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2023, November). Native American students in higher education fact sheet. <https://pnpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/NativeAmericanFactSheet-Nov-2023.pdf>

²⁷ Dortch, C. (2023, October 17). *Postsecondary education of Native Americans* (IF10554). Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10554>.

²⁸ Dortch, C. (2023, October 17). *Postsecondary education of Native Americans* (IF10554). Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10554>.

²⁹ White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education. "Tribal Colleges and Universities." U.S. Department of Education (accessed December 2020), as quoted in Minority Business Development Agency. (2021). *Tribal Colleges and Universities: Strengthening Capacity to Support Student and Community Development*. U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved from <https://www.mbda.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/TCU%20White%20Paper.pdf>.

Nearly 80% of the student population at TCUs are Native American.³⁰ TCUs offer curricula that incorporate and respect Native cultures, languages, and traditions, making them unique educational institutions in the United States.³¹

Rural Serving Institutions (RSIs)

There is a strong intersection between rural-servingness and Native-servingness. According to the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC), 94% of TCUs are also Rural Serving Institutions (RSIs) and 93% of high Native-serving institutions are also RSIs. Overall, RSIs typically enroll significantly higher percentages of Native students than non-RSIs.³²

Mental Health and Wellness

The prevalence of alcohol and substance use disorder, along with mental health issues, suicide, violence, and related health problems, remains significantly higher in American Indian and Alaska Native communities compared to the overall U.S. population.³³ Research indicates that Indigenous populations face much higher instances of mental health challenges, including suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, violence, and addiction to substances. Consequently, American Indian and Alaska Native individuals report experiencing severe psychological distress at a rate 2.5 times greater than the national average within a month. The following statistics highlight the health inequalities faced by the American Indian and Alaska Native communities:



- Native Americans have the highest suicide rates among all minority groups in the U.S., with an upward trend observed since 2003.
- Between 2016 and 2020, alcohol-induced fatalities were markedly more common (51.9 deaths per 100,000 people) in these communities than in the wider U.S. population (11.7 deaths per 100,000).
- The highest usage and disorder rates related to methamphetamine, and a significant rise in overdoses from methamphetamine.
- In 2019 and 2020, the highest rates of drug overdose deaths were recorded among non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native individuals, with 30.5 and 42.5 deaths per 100,000 people, respectively.
- The rate of overdose deaths in these populations saw a 39% increase from 2019 to 2020.

³⁰ Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2023, November). Native American students in higher education fact sheet. <https://pnpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/NativeAmericanFactSheet-Nov-2023.pdf>.

³¹ For more on TCUs, please see: American Indian Higher Education Consortium's website at <https://www.aihec.org>; and AICF's Cultivating Native Student Success page at <https://www.collegefund.org/cultivating-native-student-success/>.

³² For more on ARRC, please see: <https://www.regionalcolleges.org>.

³³ Indian Health Service. (2021). Fact sheet on behavioral health. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from <https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/behavioralhealth/>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. (2021). Mortality 1999-2020 on CDC WONDER Online Database. Retrieved from <https://wonder.cdc.gov/>; Han, B., et al. (2021). Methamphetamine overdose deaths in the United States: Sex and racial/ethnic differences. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 78(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.4321>

Cultural/Language Knowledge

While the importance of belonging is well established in student success, it is less clear how education institutions might measure and share how they are faring when it comes to creating a climate of safety and belonging for Native students.³⁴ Focusing on cultural knowledge is one way to address this question of belonging.

The 2019 NIES surveys include questions about AI/AN cultural knowledge and how that knowledge is shared with students in 4th and 8th grades. Most AI/AN 4th graders surveyed indicated knowing at least “a little” knowledge of their Tribe or community, and 17% reported that they knew “nothing” about their culture. Approximately 19 to 23% of 4th graders surveyed indicated they had “a lot” of cultural knowledge. Most (77 to 95%) 8th graders surveyed indicated having “a little” knowledge of their “AI/AN history, traditions, and current issues.” Students attending Bureau of Indian Education schools trended toward having more knowledge about their history and culture than students attending other schools, with students in schools with lower numbers of AI/AN students knowing the least or “nothing” about their cultural heritage. The general trend was that for students attending schools with higher populations of AI/AN students, the more cultural knowledge students had. Not surprisingly, students who indicated they had some level of cultural knowledge, learned that knowledge primarily from family members, followed by teachers.³⁵



A connection to their culture and cues within the educational system indicating that Native/Indigenous culture is valued allow for Native and Indigenous students to feel a real sense of belonging which can help them persist and thrive. When students enter higher education, and at transitional moments throughout their college careers, they are asking themselves two questions: “do I belong here?” and “can I do it?” Students’ answers to these questions, which are deeply impacted by environmental and interpersonal cues, can determine how they face the challenges that arise and whether they reach out for support, which ultimately affects retention and academic achievement in college. Positive mentorship can be critical in fostering a sense of belonging.³⁶ Engaging Indigenous students in mentorship programs leads to better outcomes by delivering individualized guidance, strengthening cultural ties, and encouraging both academic and personal development.³⁷

³⁴ Indian Health Service. (2021). Fact sheet on behavioral health. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from <https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/behavioralhealth/>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. (2021). Mortality 1999-2020 on CDC WONDER Online Database. Retrieved from <https://wonder.cdc.gov/>; Han, B., et al. (2021). Methamphetamine overdose deaths in the United States: Sex and racial/ethnic differences. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 78(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.4321>

³⁵ Rampey, B. D., Faircloth, S. C., Whorton, R. P., & Deaton, J. (2021). National Indian Education Study 2019 (NCES 2021-018). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2021018>

³⁶ California Center for Rural Policy, Humboldt Area Foundation, & Crane Conso. (2023). *Postsecondary Pathways in the North Coast*. California Center for Rural Policy.

³⁷ Indspire’s report “Decolonizing and Indigenizing Mentorship” highlights that culturally relevant mentorship programs significantly improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students by fostering a sense of belonging and community engagement. Indspire. (2021). *Decolonizing and Indigenizing Mentorship*. Retrieved from <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Decolonizing-and-Indigenizing-Mentorship-EN-FINAL.pdf>; The “Mapping the Mentoring Gap” study by Mentor Canada found that Indigenous youth who had mentors showed higher levels of educational attainment, cultural pride, and overall well-being, emphasizing the critical role of mentorship in supporting Indigenous students’ academic and personal development. Ervin, A. (2022). *The Mentoring Effect: Indigenous Youth*. The Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring. Retrieved from <https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Screen-Shot-2022-10-06-at-6.37.42-PM.png>



Policy Context

The path to educational success for Indigenous youth is often riddled with obstacles. Multi-generational poverty, health disparities, discrimination, and a lack of resources can create significant hurdles, their roots intertwined with historical and systemic injustices.

Youth Voices: Jemez Pueblo and Kawaioloa Opportunity Youth

“The hurdles I had to overcome to get an education were, my parents did not have a lot of money when I was growing up, and sometimes I was not the best kid to my parents. While I was at school, my teachers taught in a way that I could not really understand, and I sometimes had some bad grades. I didn’t ask for help because I was embarrassed to ask because I thought that my classmates would laugh; but as I got older I started to understand more of what my teachers were teaching and I started to get better grades. I became more confident.”

“My main challenges to accessing education were my mental and physical health issues as well as a lack of support for people of my ethnic and racial background.”

“I had to face leaving home for the first time in my life. It was hard because I’m 12 hours away from home and when there were traditional activities going on and I wanted to come home every time. Another one is finances; it is hard when you do not have a job to get that extra income.”

“I had challenges with accessing education programs because of not knowing when the programs are happening. Other challenges... [are] finding the right resources for certain educations you want to major in or asking the right questions about your path to getting to study your major.”

“I feel mad. Brainwashed. They got us good, made us memorize the pledge of allegiance. I didn’t learn about Hawai’i getting overthrown by the US in school.”

“I’ve made progress on GED. I passed two tests and I’m going to take another one soon. I got kicked out of GED class months ago, but I have been keeping up on my own, working on a laptop in the hale [residential program at Kinai ‘Eha].”



While federal legislation and policies have aimed to address the educational needs of Native Americans, several enduring issues persist:



Insufficient Funding and/or Inequitable Funding

Many Native American communities argue that the funding allocated by federal legislation is often inadequate to meet the complex educational needs of their students. Limited resources and structural racism hinder the development and implementation of effective educational programs and services.



Cultural Appropriateness

Despite efforts to promote culturally relevant education, many Native American students still encounter curricula and teaching methods that do not adequately reflect their cultural heritage or address their unique learning styles. The curriculum often lacks Native American perspectives, languages, and histories. Some curriculum has been found to be inaccurate and even racist.



Lack of Tribal Control

While legislation like the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act allows Tribes to assume control over education programs, bureaucratic hurdles and limitations in decision-making authority often restrict their ability to fully shape and manage their educational systems.



Inadequate Support for Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)

TCUs often struggle with limited resources, infrastructure, and academic programs compared to mainstream institutions. Funding disparities between TCUs and other higher education institutions persist, hindering their ability to provide quality education and support services to Native American students.



Accessibility and Infrastructure

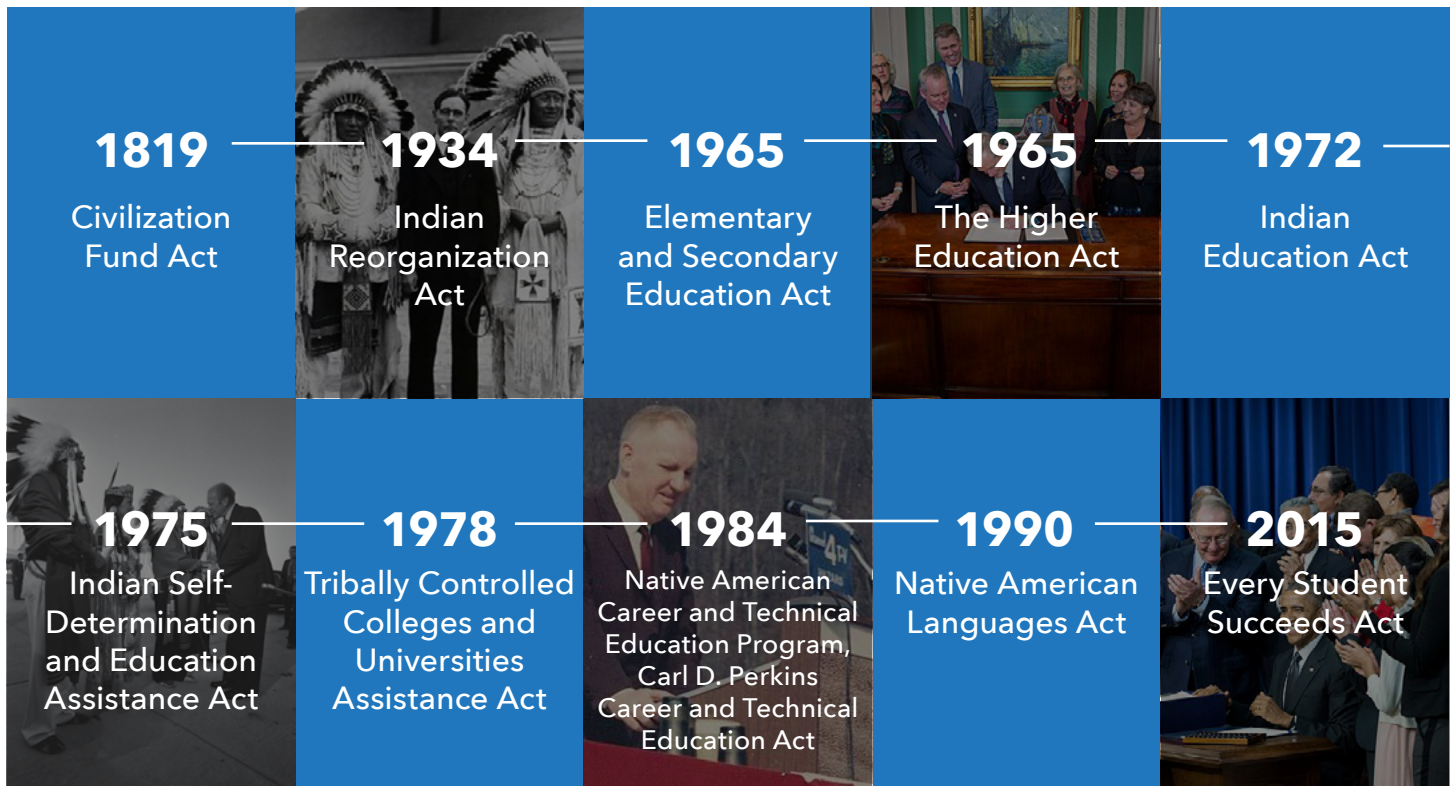
Geographic isolation and lack of infrastructure can make it difficult for Native American students to access CTE programs. Transportation, broadband internet for online learning, and other necessary infrastructure may not be adequately developed in many Native American communities, posing significant barriers to participation.



Language Preservation Challenges

While the Native American Languages Act emphasizes the importance of preserving Indigenous languages, many Native languages remain endangered due to historical suppression and lack of resources for language revitalization efforts. Challenges in integrating Native languages into educational curricula and securing funding for language programs persist.

Several major federal legislations and policies have influenced Native Americans' education in both K-12 and higher education [not an exhaustive list]:



[Civilization Fund Act \(1819\)](#): The Civilization Fund Act of 1819 authorized funding for organizations to establish and operate schools on Native American reservations, aiming to promote agriculture, literacy, and vocational skills among Indigenous populations. This act later provided the foundation for the establishment of Indian boarding schools, which played a central role in the federal policy of assimilating Native Americans into Euro-American culture.

[Indian Reorganization Act \(1934\)](#): The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 aimed to restore asset management to Native American Tribes and end the assimilation policies that had been imposed upon them and introduced the teaching of Indian history culture in BIA schools. This act marked a significant shift in U.S. policy by promoting tribal self-governance and economic development. It also sought to reverse the damage caused by previous policies by recognizing and supporting the sovereignty and cultural heritage of Native American Tribes.

[Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(1965\)](#): This act, first passed in 1965, aims to provide equal educational opportunities for all children. Title VI of ESEA specifically addresses the educational needs of Native American students, offering grants to Native American Tribes and organizations to support culturally relevant educational programs and services.

[The Higher Education Act \(1965\)](#): This law governs the administration of federal higher education programs and provides funding for a variety of programs that support Native American students in higher education, including the Tribal Colleges and Universities Program (TCUP), the Native American Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTI) program, and the Patricia Roberts Harris Native American Education Grant Program. TCUs receive funding for various programs, including infrastructure development, student support services, and academic programs that reflect Native American cultures and languages. This act has been reauthorized in 1968, 1972, 1980, 1986, 1992, 1998, and 2008. Current authorization for programs in HEA expired at the end of 2013 but has been extended by Congress while negotiating amendments.

- [Indian Education Act \(1972\)](#): This legislation, later incorporated into ESEA, recognized the unique educational needs of Native American students. It provided funding for culturally relevant educational programs, teacher training, and support services for Native American students.
- [Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act \(1975\)](#): This act allowed Native American Tribes to assume control over the administration of federal education programs serving their communities. It aimed to empower Tribes to develop and implement educational programs that reflect their cultural values and address the specific needs of their students.
- [Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act \(1978\)](#): This legislation supports the development and operation of TCUs, recognizing the importance of higher education in Native American communities. It provides funding for TCUs to offer educational programs that meet the needs of Native American students and promote cultural preservation. This act was reauthorized under Title IX of the Higher Education Act.
- [Native American Career and Technical Education Program, Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act \(1984\)](#): This piece of legislation was designed to improve and increase access to career and technical education (CTE) programs. The Native American Career and Technical Education Program (NACTEP), within the Perkins Act, specifically aims to increase the number of AI/AN students entering high-skill, high-wage, or high-demand occupations. Programs funded under NACTEP must align with state and local economic needs and should be designed to lead to a recognized postsecondary credential, certificate, or associate degree. Collaboration between tribal organizations and state and local education agencies is encouraged to ensure that Native American students receive comprehensive and cohesive support. Grants are provided to eligible tribal organizations and educational institutions serving Native American and Alaska Native students.
- [Native American Languages Act \(1990\)](#): This act recognizes the importance of preserving and revitalizing Native American languages. It supports efforts to incorporate Native American languages into educational programs and promotes the use of these languages as a medium of instruction in schools serving Native American communities.
- [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\) \(2015\)](#): This law replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2015. It gives states more flexibility in designing their education systems, but it also includes a number of provisions that are designed to improve educational outcomes for Native American students. It emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive education and provides funding for initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes for Native American students, including language preservation and teacher training programs.

In addition to these federal policies, there are a number of state policies that affect Native American youth in higher education. These policies vary from state to state, but they often include provisions for financial aid, academic support services, and cultural programs. Addressing the challenges enumerated above requires sustained collaboration between federal, tribal, and state governments, as well as meaningful engagement with Native American communities to ensure that educational policies and programs are responsive to their needs and aspirations.

Simply having policies in place is not enough, however. Their successful implementation and impact analysis are crucial. Working hand-in-hand with Indigenous communities is essential to ensure that policies truly address their diverse needs and ultimately contribute to transformative change, paving the way for successful and meaningful educational pathways for Indigenous youth.

PART II: Cultivating Fertile Ground for Transformation

Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS)'s Indigenous Opportunity Youth Network

Indigenous opportunity youth (IOY) face a multitude of hurdles in their educational journeys. Like other OY, the number of IOY has nearly doubled since the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving many without access to the resources and support needed to pursue postsecondary education. These young adults, aged 16-24 and neither in school nor employed, face numerous barriers to accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education, a critical step toward securing stable, well-paying careers. These barriers include socioeconomic issues, systemic obstacles, and personal circumstances such as housing and food insecurity, the need for flexible employment, experiences with the foster care or justice system, and challenges related to immigration status (Indigenous Central and South American students) or educational backgrounds. Many of these young adults have a high school diploma but lack the support to access and succeed in postsecondary education.

They face various challenges, including:

- Financial hardship: They often need to work, making it difficult to find affordable and flexible education options.
- Systemic barriers: They may have limited access to quality education, career guidance, and culturally relevant resources.
- Personal challenges: Many have experienced housing and food insecurity, childcare needs, or involvement in the justice system, further hindering their educational pursuits.

Despite these challenges, IOY are highly motivated to succeed. However, traditional postsecondary systems are often not equipped to support their unique needs.

The Forum for Community Solutions (FCS), a program of AIFCS, launched the Opportunity Youth Forum and Fund (OYF) in 2013 as part of its vision to build a future where communities create their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face, rooted in the belief that if communities have more power to lead change, we will create a more just and equitable society. The OYF currently supports a network of over forty communities focused on improving education and workforce outcomes for OY, emphasizing collaborative, community-based efforts to overcome systemic barriers and foster postsecondary completion and employment pathways.



This collaborative approach, combined with a commitment to Indigenous knowledge and cultural identity, holds the key to unlocking brighter futures for IOY. AIFCS hosts two OYF convenings annually. The fall convening, held at the AIFCS campus in Aspen, Colorado, focuses on national innovations and movement-building efforts. The spring convening is typically hosted by a member community to promote learning in local context and to if up local best practices for reconnecting opportunity youth.

Youth Voices: Kawaiola

Kawaiola youth reflections on their experiences at the OYF Convenings in 2023.

“The OYF Convening was a great learning and networking experience. I felt empowered and saw for myself how important youth voices are.” (Spring 2023)

“My experience in Austin...I learned what it meant to be a part of the opportunity youth movement, and I came back home with a sense of motivation and urgency to apply what I learned at the convening...” (Spring 2023)

“All my peers should have the opportunity to attend OYF at least once, for the experience.” (Fall 2023)

The Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice (NITCOP)

The Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice (NITCOP), facilitated by AIFCS staff, consists of Opportunity Youth Forum backbone organizations in partnership with Native Americans in Philanthropy, collaborating to exchange best practices, create new knowledge, and achieve shared goals.

2024 Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice – Member Communities

- Wild Rivers Community Foundation (Del Norte & Tribal Lands)
- The Hopi Foundation (Hopi)
- Taos Pueblo Division of Health and Community Services (Taos Pueblo)
- Laguna Community Foundation (Laguna Pueblo), Jemez Department of Education (Jemez Pueblo)
- Opportunity Youth Action Hawai’i at Kawaiola (Hawaii)
- Hoopa Tribal Education Association (Hoopa)
- Cheyenne River Youth Project (Lakota).

2024 Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice – Funding Partners for NITCOP Select Initiatives

- ECMC Foundation
- ECHO Fund
- Native Americans in Philanthropy
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The NITCOP facilitates change by merging the community’s need for meaningful knowledge sharing with the ability to achieve positive, culturally relevant outcomes. This group was established to enhance community

collaboration and collective impact, and it actively disseminates its findings. To achieve this, the NITCOP develops and regularly updates a “Community Learning Agenda” based on input from its members, aiming to explore key questions that affect community pathways.

The AIFCS OYF NITCOP was launched about ten years ago through AIFCS’s investments in the Del Norte/ Yurok and Hopi communities, fueled by AIFCS’s unrelenting commitment to equity in Indigenous communities. Over the last decade, AIFCS has invested over \$1 million in each of these two tribal communities, which provided the impetus for the founding of the Native Indigenous and Tribal Community of Practice. This collective, supported by operational funding from AIFCS, emerged from a shared commitment to enhance educational and employment pathways, with a central focus on elevating Indigenous leadership within these efforts. As a part of this initiative, members of NITCOP actively engage in integrating best practices and indigenizing spaces within the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF). NITCOP leaders have been instrumental in advocating for platforms that allow Indigenous communities to share learning and ideas, and importantly, to incorporate the perspectives and voices of the youth. This collective strives to maintain a connected and safe space to openly discuss the challenges facing their environments, fostering a supportive network for all members involved. The network continues to expand based on new investments from AIFCS OYF to include more Indigenous communities.

The NITCOP supports community-driven levers of change, embodied in the learning agenda. Their learning agenda seeks to address the three levers of change below:

- **Data Sovereignty**

- The right of each Indigenous community to govern the collection, ownership, and application of data, information, and knowledge about its peoples, lands, and resources
- Exercise Indigenous data sovereignty through the interrelated processes of decolonizing data and Indigenizing data governance

- **Healing Centered Organizing**

- Healing Centered Organizing (HCO) as an effort that engages youth community members in a process that builds individual and collective health, well-being, and hopefulness by combining emotional and spiritual healing and a range of wellness practices while also focusing on organizing strategies aimed at changing public policies.

- **Mapping of Opportunity and Youth Led-Change**

- What are the secondary education pathways available for Native youth?
- What are practical tools and lessons learned amongst tribal youth for a high-quality reengagement program?
- Centering youth leadership at the stages of progression to a strong OYF Tribal Community of Practice and how are they measured?
- What are the characteristics of a youth supportive OYF Tribal Community site?

Voices from the Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community Of Practice Members, Quarterly Meeting, May 2024

[AIFCS created a] “network or meaningful sharing with other communities who do similar work.” [A network] “to share best practices for youth through a Native perspective.”

[AIFCS assisted with] “funding our internship programs and also the convenings that have helped educate me in my work in our community.”

“AIFCS supported our youth summit event with Jemez Pueblo.” (Zia Pueblo)

[AIFCS supported our youth] “to travel, learn, and connect with others and practice sharing their stories at convenings. Meeting youth leaders/entrepreneurs has sharpened them.”

[AIFCS] “has great resources and information [and] opened up conversations around data collection, technical assistance, and post-secondary education.”

[AIFCS] “provided data frameworks (best practices” and technical assistance with our data efforts. At Hopi, we’ve been able to develop our own Data Governance Framework.”

When institutions of higher education, federal and state governments, business, philanthropy, and tribal communities come together in a spirit of respect and cooperation, systemic change to improve communities can happen. When working with tribal communities, those communities should maintain their sovereignty in determining courses of action, method of implementation, stakeholder engagement, and funding. **Too often funders, governmental entities, and academia engage tribal communities in ways that undermine their right to self-determination and, instead, these entities do “to” tribal communities rather than “with” and “for” tribal communities.** Indigenous communities spend an exceeding amount of time and energy justifying the existence and efficacy of their programs to non-Indigenous funders, in addition to their programmatic work.

Pathways to Postsecondary Success

There are many pathways to postsecondary success. In general, the goal is to ensure that all Indigenous youth have access to high-quality education and workforce training that empowers them to achieve their full potential and participate in strengthening tribal sovereignty, while preparing for the jobs of the future. As discussed here and drawing on research on guided pathways from a variety of educational sources, pathways must prepare students for future growth at each stage in the educational pipeline including strong support systems and multiple and varied on-ramps.³⁸

³⁸ Please see, for example: Jenkins, D., Lahr, H., Fink, J., & Ganga, E. (2018). What we are learning about guided pathways. Part 1: A reform moves from theory to practice. New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center; Weissman, S. (2024, March 14). A deeper look at guided pathways. Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/institutions/community-colleges/2024/03/14/two-studies-take-deeper-look-guided-pathways>

Voices from the Field: *Postsecondary Pathways in the North Coast Report*. California Center for Rural Policy

Institutional support for Indigenous education is essential for creating a better future. Support for Indigenous education can promote truth, healing, and the generational investment made by local tribal communities and individuals. Building new relationships with local tribal communities during administration changes is crucial for maintaining strong community engagement. Returning this investment through ongoing support for Indigenous education is necessary for creating a more equitable future for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Pathways to and through Postsecondary

Postsecondary pathways seek to bring opportunities to earn college credit and credentials of value into secondary education as well as providing multiple on-ramps so students can earn while learning beyond secondary. Ideally, pathways ensure that high school and postsecondary curricula are aligned, intentionally articulated, and transferable, stacking to progressive education attainment, and leading to better paying employment opportunities. To be effective and sustainable, pathways must be aligned to regional and tribal economic needs.³⁹ Pathways can include secondary education, postsecondary education, and workforce development. Collaboration across sectors is critical to building effective pathways; stakeholders should, at minimum, include secondary and postsecondary education, employers, and workforce development representatives.

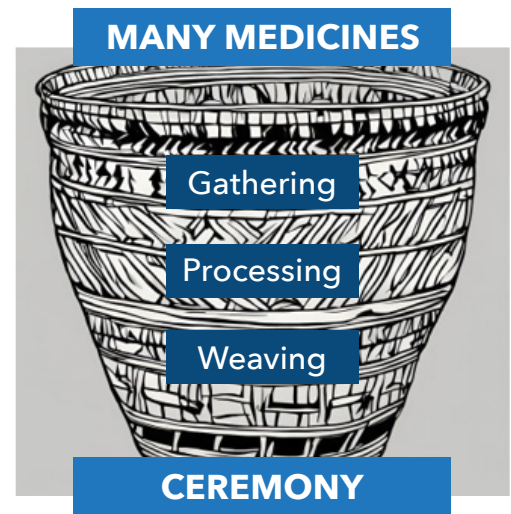
Workforce development pathway programs offer practical, career-focused training that can lead to immediate job opportunities, often in fields that are in demand within or near tribal communities. These programs can be particularly appealing because they are typically shorter in duration than a four-year college degree and focus on developing specific skills that are directly applicable to the workforce needs locally. This practical aspect aligns well with the immediate needs of many individuals and communities, offering a path to employment that may not require relocation or the investment of time and resources associated with a traditional college degree.

Educational attainment is an essential element of developing and maintaining tribal sovereignty. It plays a critical role in nation building.

³⁹ This section was informed in part by Aspen Community Solutions Forum Postsecondary Pathways for Rural Tribal Communities grant grantees: Jemez Pueblo and Del Norte Tribal Lands, as well as by Brock, T., & Slater, D. (2021). Strategies for Improving Postsecondary Credential Attainment among Black, Hispanic, and Native American Adults. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University and by the work of the Texas Regional Pathways Network's Implementation Tool. Retrieved from <https://wtxpathways.org/>.

Woven Pathways Framework: Integrating Tradition and Opportunity in Indigenous Education

For many Indigenous communities, the creation of a basket is not just a process but a deep, cultural and communal journey. In this regard, the intricate art of basket weaving mirrors the comprehensive pathway of Indigenous students through postsecondary education. Each stage of the basket's cultural, spiritual, and physical formation—Ceremony, Gathering, Processing, Weaving, and Many Medicines—symbolically represents crucial aspects of the educational trek.



In basketweaving, the work circles around and around from the base, moves up to create the walls of the basket to its entirety, and integrates different materials and designs along the way. Supporting IOY must be seen through a similar lens. Working with IOY should never be conceptualized as linear nor generic. Just as every basket and pathway is unique, representing the unique nature of the weaver—their culture, their experiences, their natural world, and their dreams and aspirations—so too is the experience of every Indigenous youth navigating their educational experience.

The woven pathways framework incorporates a variety of key elements to explain the educational journey of IOY:

Ceremony is the foundation, much like the base of a basket, providing stability and grounding. In the context of postsecondary pathways, it encompasses the essential supports that foster a sense of belonging and cultural relevance for Indigenous students. This includes active family and tribal engagement, ensuring that educational experiences are not only culturally aligned but also responsive to tribal economic and workforce needs. Just as ceremony honors and invokes the spirit of community and tradition, this domain celebrates and integrates the student's cultural heritage and tribal sovereignty into their educational journey.

Gathering represents the collection of materials needed to begin weaving the basket, paralleling the preparation required for a student's postsecondary success. It involves assembling a culturally informed curriculum and pedagogy, enriched by high-quality teachers who understand and respect Indigenous traditions and learning styles. This stage ensures that all necessary educational resources are culturally appropriate, just as materials gathered for a basket are chosen for their strength, flexibility, and suitability.

Processing relates to the methodical preparation of materials before weaving, akin to the individual and institutional steps Indigenous students need in place in order to pursue postsecondary opportunities. This includes education institutions building awareness of programs, maintaining communication with family and tribal communities, and providing vital supports to student in areas such as advising, application processes, and securing financial aid. Much like processing fibers to make them pliable for weaving, this stage prepares students thoroughly, ensuring they are ready to successfully navigate the complexities of higher education.

Weaving involves the actual construction of the basket, requiring skill, patience, precision, and persistence. For Indigenous students, this is the active participation in postsecondary opportunities. For education institutions, it is the systemic actions it takes to ensure a student is successful. These actions include personalized orientations, mentoring, coaching, and access to workforce training opportunities that are articulated to Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses. Industry-relevant micro-credentials embedded in high school courses also play a role, weaving together education and practical skills in a coherent, supportive framework.

Many Medicines reflects the diversity of techniques and materials that can be employed in basket weaving, symbolizing the varied on-ramps and pathways necessary for students to access and succeed in postsecondary paths. This domain advocates for multiple entry points and partnerships between workforce and higher education entities, allowing for a flexible, scaffolded approach to learning and working. This flexibility enables students to interlace work and education seamlessly, promoting continuous advancement in their careers and educational goals. The coiling of the basket reminds us that not all pathways are linear, they can also be circular and winding.

Just as a basket weaver integrates various elements to create a functional and beautiful artifact, so too must the educational journey of Indigenous students weave together these domains to support a holistic, culturally enriched, and effective pathway into and through postsecondary education.

Ceremony	Gathering	Processing	Weaving	Many Medicines
Belonging	Culturally informed curriculum	Awareness of Programs	Small, Personal Orientation	Multiple on-ramps that include workforce and higher ed
Family/Tribal Engagement	Culturally informed pedagogy	Communication with Family/Tribe	Early and Continued Advising	partnerships that allow for a scaffolding of earning and learning empowering individuals to work, advance, weave in education to advance career goals
Cultural Relevance	Culturally informed, high-quality teachers	Early and Continued Advising	Mentoring	All pathways are stackable, able to stand alone, but able to progress toward a 2-yr and 4-yr degree.
Language	Targeted and inclusive research/student success interventions	Application Support	1:1 Coaching	Multiple course modalities including hybrid, online, asynchronous
Acknowledged History	Dual Enrollment opportunities	Financial Aid Support	Workforce training opportunities articulated to CTE courses	Circular pathways in addition to linear options
Alignment to tribal economic needs and workforce needs	Career Technical Education opportunities	Consistent Funding for Programs/Operational funding	Courses embedded with industry relevant micro-credentials/certificates	
Alignment to tribal strategic goals	Experiential learning	Broadband infrastructure	Workforce courses articulated to 2-yr and 4-yr degree pathways	
Designated, visible Indigenized land and space	Industry-related certificates			
	Internships			

Pathway Models Are Critical to Postsecondary Access and Success

Many students find the transition from high school to college challenging or unclear, leading to low postsecondary enrollment. Creating seamlessly connected programs of study and degree plans between secondary and postsecondary education, students are less likely to veer off course. Pathway programs offer courses and training that could serve as steppingstones toward further education, including two-year associate degrees and transferable micro-credentials and credits, which may indirectly facilitate the transition to four-year institutions. Students who are unable to transfer credits between educational institutions or apply transfer credits to a degree program, are at increased risk of failing to complete their education. Pathways can also address the growing affordability challenge in postsecondary education by allowing students to earn credits and credentials at little to no cost and while employed, so that they can *earn while they learn*.

Effective postsecondary pathways for tribal communities:

- Include regional pathways that are strategically aligned to tribal economic needs, leveraging existing pathways related to education and workforce development programs and initiatives in the region.
- Have formal agreements (e.g. MOUs) and processes for working across institutions and organizations in place.
- Are reversed mapped from industry to postsecondary to K-12 in order to build a talent pipeline to high-wage, in-demand jobs with career advancement opportunities that are aligned to tribal needs.
- Use regional labor market information and tribal priorities to identify growing industries, not just in-demand jobs now.
- Enable students to earn industry-recognized credentials that are stackable towards further educational attainment and, ultimately, career advancement opportunities.
- Include strong college and career advising that starts early and continues throughout a student's educational journey.
- Incorporate work-based learning, providing students an opportunity to apply academic and technical knowledge and skills learned in the classroom in real word settings.
- Design and implement strategies for postsecondary pathways that ensure the programs are cost-efficient and allow for students to complete in a timely manner.
- Are streamlined and stackable toward a credential of value, ensuring students can transition into high-wage and high-demand careers.
- Increase economic activity and produce skilled workforce in rural tribal areas will require innovative collaborations among employers, school districts, institutions of higher education, and tribal communities.

Native American rural tribal communities, like many diverse groups, have varied approaches to education that reflect their unique cultural, social, and economic contexts. While it's challenging to generalize across all Native American communities due to the vast diversity among Tribes, their geographic contexts, and economic needs, it is possible to draw out some common approaches.



Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS) Innovative Pathways Spotlight

Spotlight #1: Jemez Pueblo⁴⁰

The Jemez Pueblo project, in partnership with Northern New Mexico College (NNMC), has successfully launched a career pathway program for high school students at Jemez Valley Public Schools, focusing initially on electrical courses with plans to expand into other trades. The program offers dual credit enrollment courses, allowing students to earn college credits and prepare for apprenticeships in their chosen fields. Notably, the project has seen significant female participation and aims to enhance diversity and address challenges such as staffing and remote location issues. The collaboration has fostered a closer relationship between NNMC, local schools, and the community, with all initial participants completing the course and being celebrated within the community.

Spotlight #2: Del Norte and Tribal Lands⁴¹

The Postsecondary Pathways in the North Coast is an human-centered research project aimed at improving postsecondary educational and career opportunities for Opportunity Youth, particularly in rural and tribal areas of the North Coast. It details the collaborative efforts between local foundations, educational institutions, and community organizations, emphasizing a human-centered design and decolonizing methodologies to address the unique challenges these communities face. Through extensive research and community engagement, the initiative has identified key barriers to educational access and success, including structural racism, geographical isolation, and the lack of culturally relevant resources. The project is committed to building sustainable, community-driven solutions that respect and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and practices, aiming to create equitable pathways for all youth in these underserved regions.

⁴⁰ A federally recognized Tribe 50 miles northwest of Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Jemez Pueblo and its people have maintained their traditional way of life, a life supported by strong values, deep cultural respect, and the unique Towa language. Jemez is one of the remaining 19 Pueblos of New Mexico, encompassing over 89,000 acres of land and home to over 3,400 tribal members. www.jemezpuablo.com

⁴¹ Del Norte and Tribal Lands is a collaborative of youth, agencies, tribal governments, nonprofits, and educational institutions. The Pathways Partners include: Yurok Tribal Education, Redwood Coast Indian Career Pathways (RCICP), Del Norte Indian Career Pathways (DNICP), Blue Lake Rancheria Tribe Education Pathways, Del Norte Unified School District, College of the Redwoods (CR)—Del Norte Campus, Project Rebound—Cal Poly Humboldt, Native American Studies Department—Cal Poly Humboldt, The Indian Tribal & Educational Personnel Program (ITEPP)—Cal Poly Humboldt, Food Sovereignty Lab & Traditional Ecological Knowledge Institute (FSL/TEK)—Cal Poly Humboldt, Native Women's Collective, Humboldt County Office of Education (HCOE).

Creating Conditions for Change: Policy and Practice

Well-crafted policies at both federal and state levels can play a crucial role in clearing the postsecondary path for Indigenous and Native American students.

These policies can act as powerful tools to address these systemic barriers.

- Increased funding can open doors to early childhood education, culturally relevant curriculum, and scholarships, easing financial burdens and providing essential resources.
- Policies to promote and support Indigenous languages, cultural practices, and knowledge systems can foster a sense of belonging and empower youth to connect with their heritage within the classroom walls.
- Additionally, efforts to acknowledge and address historical inequalities, such as the legacy of boarding schools, can pave the way for healing and reconciliation, leading to increased trust and engagement in the education system.

But the purposes of education must move beyond classroom walls at some point and into the workplace and life in the public sphere. These purposes include career advancement and socioeconomic mobility. Education must create career growth opportunities for Indigenous youth and empower the pursuit of meaningful careers that serve both individual and communal needs.

Finally, effective policy fosters collaboration and partnerships between various stakeholders. Indigenous communities, educational institutions, and government agencies can come together to develop and implement culturally appropriate and impactful programs across sectors that meet the specific needs of Indigenous youth.

The landscape of policy areas impacting Native American/Indigenous students in higher education is complex, shaped by historical, social, and political factors. The following recommended directions for policy design, implementation, and continuous improvement aim to maximize the impacts of key policies as they pertain to student access, success, and overall experience in higher ed.

Historical Injustices:

Historical policies, such as forced assimilation through boarding schools and the reservation system, have had enduring effects on Native communities and are often ignored, under-acknowledged and/or suppressed.⁴² These historical injustices impact educational opportunities for Native students.



⁴² See, U.S. Department of the Interior. (2022). Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative investigative report. Retrieved from <https://narf.org/nill/documents/nlr/nlr38-2.pdf>; Native American Rights Fund. (2013). Let all that is Indian within you die! NARF Legal Review, 38(2), 1-19. Retrieved from <https://narf.org/nill/documents/nlr/nlr38-2.pdf>; and National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. (n.d.). National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. Retrieved from <https://boardingschoolhealing.org>.

Implications: Policies that recognize historical trauma and work towards redress are crucial. The acknowledgment of historical context informs contemporary approaches to education for Native American students.

Best Practice

Fort Lewis College in Colorado is working to reconcile its past as an Indian Boarding School, through ongoing healing efforts and intentional dialogue involving Indigenous students, faculty, and staff, and by removing inaccurate and harmful artwork depicting a sanitized version of the college's history.

The Myaamia Center, a Miami Nation of Oklahoma initiative, serves the needs of the tribal community, the university, and partner communities through research, education, and outreach that promote Myaamia language, culture, knowledge, and values. The Center is located within at Miami University, which is on the homelands of the Myaamia people.

Tribal Sovereignty and Self-Determination:

Policies respecting tribal sovereignty and self-determination play a pivotal role in shaping higher education experiences for Indigenous students. This includes the authority of Tribes in education governance in order to achieve economic, cultural, and tribal sovereignty goals.

Implications: Strengthening partnerships between tribal nations and educational institutions is essential. Policies that empower Tribes in shaping their educational systems and their economies foster culturally relevant and community-driven initiatives.

Best Practice

Navajo Nation Talent Marketplace: The Navajo Nation, in collaboration with Aspire Ability and the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), is launching the Navajo Nation Talent Marketplace. This initiative will establish a central database of all job opportunities within the Navajo reservation, available both locally and remotely. The marketplace will provide job skills identification, postsecondary programs tailored to employer needs, and aims to tackle structural employment barriers, thereby supporting economic growth and reducing migration and brain drain among the Navajo people.

Funding and Resource Allocation:

Federal funding mechanisms, such as those tied to the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and tribal colleges, significantly impact the quality and accessibility of education for Native students. Native-led philanthropy in Indian Country has undergone significant evolution in recent decades, empowering Indigenous communities to dictate their own priorities and solutions. This shift toward self-determination has enabled targeted funding for educational initiatives, directly impacting postsecondary pathways for Indigenous students.

Implications: Policies promoting equitable funding for Native-serving institutions, recognizing the unique needs of these communities, are vital. Adequate resources are essential to address educational disparities. Funding of programs that are culturally informed and tribally driven prove to be more successful. By investing long term in culturally relevant education and support systems, Native and non-Native philanthropic efforts have improved and will continue to improve access to higher education and will play a pivotal role in nurturing the next generation of Indigenous leaders and professionals.

Best Practice

ECMC: ECMC Foundation is a nationwide private foundation dedicated to eradicating equity gaps in postsecondary education by the year 2040. Utilizing a variety of funding mechanisms, including strategic grants and program-related investments via Education Innovation Ventures, the Foundation supports both nonprofit and for-profit initiatives. In its quest for systemic change, ECMC Foundation focuses its efforts on three strategic priorities: eliminating obstacles to postsecondary completion, enhancing the capacity of organizations, institutions, and systems, and transforming the postsecondary ecosystem. ECMC currently funds initiatives in Indian Country, including AIFCS's Postsecondary Pathways for Rural Tribal Communities effort.

Native Americans in Philanthropy: Native Americans in Philanthropy is a powerful and growing network of Native and non-Native nonprofits, tribal communities, foundations, and community leaders committed to engaging, learning, and sharing resources and best practices grounded in the Native tradition of reciprocity. This tradition of reciprocity involves a cultural and spiritual practice of mutual exchange and giving back to the community, reflecting a deep relationship with the land, resources, and each other, where every contribution has a corresponding responsibility to support the well-being of all. Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) is a membership-based organization committed to fostering a world that includes Native peoples in creating deep, long-lasting impact and systemic, sustainable change across all communities.

Cultural Competency and Curriculum Inclusion:

Policies and practices related to curriculum development and cultural competency within educational institutions and other organizations impact the inclusion and sense of belonging experienced by Indigenous students in higher education and beyond.

Implications: Encouraging the integration of Native perspectives into educational curricula and fostering cultural competency among faculty and staff are critical and serve to build confidence in a student's own cultural identity. Inclusive policies contribute to a more supportive and enriching learning environment.

Best Practice

Indian Teacher and Educational Personnel Program (ITEPP): ITEPP at Cal Poly Humboldt aims to recruit, retain, and support Native American students in the education field. This program provides culturally relevant mentorship, academic support, and professional development opportunities, ensuring that Indigenous students are well-prepared to become educators and leaders in their communities.

National Institute for Native Leadership in Higher Education (NINLHE): NINLHE's mission is to transform higher education in the United States and Canada to better serve American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and First Nations students. By enhancing the professional development of both Native and non-Native higher education professionals, NINLHE aims to boost Native student recruitment, retention, and graduation rates. Strengthening these individuals' capacities and promoting culturally appropriate practices not only improves the educational experiences of Native students but also enriches the professional environment for staff and faculty across North America.

Native Youth Climate Adaptation Leadership Congress (NYCALC): NYCALC works to build students' confidence in their cultural identity as they learn about Indigenous traditions and climate concerns across the United States and territories. Native students develop conservation leadership skills and build on their knowledge and abilities to build climate resiliency in their communities.

Mental, Physical, and Emotional Health:

Explicit policies supporting mental health and wellness initiatives for Native American students are essential. Such policies include initiatives aimed at culturally responsive support services, holistic wellness programs, fostering belonging, and addressing historical trauma. These policies recognize the unique challenges faced by Native American students, such as cultural displacement, systemic discrimination, and limited access to healthcare.

Implications: By implementing culturally relevant mental health services, promoting traditional healing practices, and fostering supportive campus environments, these policies aim to improve overall well-being and academic success. However, challenges remain in funding, access to culturally competent care, and addressing systemic inequalities, highlighting the ongoing need for comprehensive and sustained support for Native American students in higher education.

Best Practice

Belonging, Meaning, Well-Being and Purpose (BMWP): BMWP is the emergent framework that has grown out of collective work within and outside of AIFCS. It provides direction on how to transform systems and practices for the benefit of impacted young people and communities.

BMWP stands for belonging, meaning, well-being and purpose. Belonging in the BMWP framework focuses on both social belonging and structural belonging. Meaning within the BMWP framework focuses on interventions that address the ways in which people make sense of themselves, others and social situations. Well-being is both an outcome and a framework in itself, involving personal and structural supports, and the absence of intergenerational trauma. Purpose refers to one's desire and intention to achieve something that is significant to one's life and of consequence to the world in which one lives.

Youth Voices: Kawaihoa Youth

The below testimonial is from a Kawaihoa youth reflecting on the positive impacts that he has experienced in the Kinai 'Eha program. Translated from Hawaiian, Kinai 'Eha means "To Extinguish Pain." This program aims to provide alternative education to youth and is focused on building values-focused and purpose-driven lives.

"Kinai 'Eha introduces different avenues of fitness, like weightlifting, paddling and rock climbing. The most transformative aspect of fitness is its ability to start breaking down bad habits by replacing them with good ones...Negative habits, thoughts, even substance use, when you start to prioritize your health and well-being, you start to be more conscious of the choices that you make."

Data Sovereignty

Data sovereignty refers to the right of a group or individual to govern the collection, ownership, and use of their data. In the context of Native Americans, it specifically applies to the right of each Tribe to control their own data. This includes but is not limited to information about their members, resources, and cultural heritage. Data sovereignty is crucial for Native Americans for several reasons. Historically, data collection about them has been conducted by outsiders, often without their consent or with harmful consequences. This has led to inaccurate portrayals, exploitation of resources, and difficulty advocating for their rights.

Implications: By asserting data sovereignty, Native nations can ensure that information about them is collected ethically, used responsibly, and reflects their own perspectives. This empowers them to make informed decisions about their communities, cultures, education, and futures.

Best Practice

The Hopi Data Governance Framework: The Hopi Data Governance Framework, catalyzed by AIFCS's Data Sovereignty work, documents their comprehensive approach to managing and overseeing their own data. This framework outlines policies, procedures, governance structure, security, and standards for their data including its use and management. It also includes contractual agreements (e.g., data sharing agreements, informed consent) and data collection tools.

Indigenous Digital Sovereignty

Bridging the digital divide in Indian Country is critical for Native American Tribes. "Digital sovereignty," which encompasses control over internet access and data, is key to achieving this. The vast territory of Indian Country, with 334 reservations spread across 35 states and encompassing 100 million acres, presents a significant challenge. A pre-pandemic study by the American Indian Policy Institute revealed substantial disparities in internet access: 18% of reservation residents lack home internet, while 33% rely on often unreliable cellular data. Only 49% have access to land-based internet. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues, highlighting affordability and quality concerns.

Implications: Addressing these disparities requires targeted funding that respects the unique needs and autonomy of each Tribe, from Oklahoma to Alaska and South Dakota. Digital Sovereignty is critical for both sustainable educational pathways and economic development.

Best Practice

Jemez Pueblo Tribal Network: The Pueblo of Jemez has been a leader in bringing broadband service to its communities through the Jemez Pueblo Tribal Network, which offers high-speed internet via fiber optic technology. While building its broadband capacity, it is also building out educational pathways for potential job growth sectors that are enabled by the arrival of community-wide broadband network. This effort was partially funded by the New Mexico Office of Broadband Access and Expansion and CARES Act federal funds. The JPTN intends to transition to a subsidized traditional subscription model in the future.

Incorporating Native Youth Voice, Leadership, and Experience

Empowering Indigenous young people to have a say in decisions that affect their lives is essential for fostering a more inclusive and culturally rich society. Incorporating the voice, leadership, and experience of Native youth involves actively engaging them in leadership roles and ensuring their perspectives are heard and valued. This approach not only benefits the youth but also strengthens cultural heritage and enhances decision-making processes with fresh insights and innovative ideas.

Incorporating Native youth voice requires creating platforms where youth can express their opinions and influence policies. Leadership opportunities for these youth involve providing them with roles in tribal governance, community projects, cultural preservation initiatives, and their own education. Recognizing and integrating their experiences into broader strategies ensures that the unique challenges and aspirations of Indigenous youth are addressed.

Implications: Supporting Native youth leadership necessitates investment in culturally relevant mentorship programs, leadership training, and initiatives that promote active youth participation. Tribal governments, educational institutions, and community organizations must collaborate to create environments where youth voices are not just heard but also heeded. This approach is vital for preserving cultural heritage, building resilient communities, and preparing the next generation for future challenges and opportunities.

Best Practice

Center for Native American Youth: The Center for Native American Youth (CNAY) at AIFCS is a national education and advocacy organization dedicated to partnering with Native youth—aged 24 and under—across reservations, rural villages, and urban areas nationwide to enhance their health, safety, and well-being. Believing that all Native youth should lead complete and healthy lives, have equal opportunities, and find strength and inspiration in their cultural heritage, CNAY realizes these goals through empowerment and culturally sensitive approaches, focusing on leadership, youth-driven policy initiatives, and narratives led by the youth themselves.

Fresh Tracks: Fresh Tracks is a transformative initiative by AIFCS and partners, designed to empower youth, particularly those from Indigenous, rural, and urban backgrounds, through leadership development, civic engagement, and cross-cultural community building. The program emphasizes the healing power of nature and culture, aiming to break down systemic barriers and promote social and environmental justice. By fostering diverse youth leadership, Fresh Tracks seeks to create significant shifts in community engagement and policy making, enhancing the life outcomes and well-being of young people involved.

United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY): UNITY is a national organization focused on empowering Native American and Alaska Native youth through leadership development, community building, and cultural preservation. The heart of UNITY is its 320 affiliated youth councils, sponsored by Tribes, Alaska Native villages, high schools, colleges, urban centers, and others, across 36 states. These youth councils engage in annual projects focused on four key areas: cultural preservation, environmental awareness, healthy lifestyles, and community service.

Recommendations/Opportunities

Addressing the gap between policy and program design and implementation is critical to ensure that programs and policies achieve their intended outcomes, particularly for rural tribal communities. Effective implementation requires robust community engagement, comprehensive planning, and continuous feedback mechanisms. Policies and programs should be co-created with the communities they aim to serve, reflecting their unique needs and perspectives. Non-Indigenous stakeholders must take the time to understand how to work with tribal communities, recognizing the diversity among Tribes and the importance of building trust through time, consistency, and being of good mind (approaching the situation with positive intentions, clarity, and balance). For Indigenous people, integrating traditional knowledge, promoting cultural preservation, and ensuring sustainable resource allocation are key to bringing policy visions and programs to life and promoting better outcomes. The following recommendations and opportunities provide a framework for creating and supporting postsecondary pathways that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of rural tribal communities.

General Recommendations:

1. The intersecting experiences of Native Americans and also those of rural communities must be considered in research and policy discussions, considering and prioritizing their needs when making decisions about resource allocation or infrastructure investment (such as broadband access).
2. Flexible education and workforce pathways must be designed with tribal community needs as a guiding principle.
3. Invest in the long-term sustainability of Tribal Colleges and Universities, including financial resources, capacity building, leadership development, and the creation and support of talent pipelines.
4. Tribal colleges, 2-year colleges, and 4-year universities should work with tribal communities and Native students to design long-term strategies that include holistic, place-based, and collaborative student support aimed at driving transformative and systemic change to enhance the success of Native students.
5. For youth and young adults living on tribal lands, pathway design should coincide with culturally appropriate economic development and support.
6. Define, collect, and make meaning of data about Native and Indigenous youth and young adult well-being, with a focus on incorporating lived experiences.
7. Incorporate youth voice in meaningful ways and create opportunities for youth leadership in education, tribal governance, cultural activities, and community organizations.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **Advocate for and Promote Political Classification of Native Americans:** Recognizing Native Americans as a political category in higher education admissions to align with the *Morton v. Mancari* decision, which deems such preferences constitutional. This classification is crucial for fostering education and leadership training, strengthening tribal self-determination and sovereignty, and supporting the constitutional trust relationship between the United States and Indian Tribes. This legal argument may be useful when applied to exempt Native Americans from anti-DEI policies and race-conscious admissions prohibitions in higher education settings.⁴³
2. **Promote Data Collection and Research:** Encourage the implementation of policies that support rigorous data collection and research on the educational trajectories of Native American youth, in consultation and partnership with tribal communities. This includes tracking enrollment rates, retention, graduation rates, and post-graduation outcomes. Reliable data is crucial for identifying gaps, assessing the effectiveness of current educational programs, and making informed decisions about where to allocate resources most effectively. Policy makers should also support research that investigates the specific factors contributing to success or challenges within Native American communities in the educational sphere.
3. **Data Sovereignty:** Advocate for the creation and enforcement of robust data protection policies that recognize the sovereignty of Native American communities. These laws should ensure that data generated by these communities, especially data pertaining to cultural heritage, personal identities, and community resources, is owned and controlled by the communities themselves. All data sovereignty policies should prioritize decolonized methodologies, including the use of qualitative data in research and program evaluation. Data sovereignty policies should also facilitate the establishment of protocols for data sharing and usage that respect the autonomy and cultural values of Native American Tribes.
4. **Enhanced Financial Support for Students:** Policy makers should advocate for and establish dedicated funding streams for scholarships, grants, and stipends that specifically target Native American youth. These financial supports should aim to reduce the barriers to accessing higher education, such as tuition costs, living expenses, and transportation. Ensuring that financial aid programs are well-publicized and easily accessible to these communities can significantly increase college enrollment and completion rates.
5. **Reduce Bureaucratic Barriers and Expand Tribal Decision-Making Authority:** Strengthen tribal sovereignty in education by reducing bureaucratic barriers and expanding decision-making authority for Tribes, enabling them to fully control and manage their educational systems in alignment with their cultural values and community priorities. Although current legislation, such as the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, permits Tribes to oversee education programs, they often face significant obstacles, including restrictive federal regulations and limited autonomy. Addressing these barriers is essential for allowing Tribes to exercise true self-determination in shaping and managing educational systems that reflect their unique cultural heritage and meet the specific needs of their communities.

⁴² Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP. (2024, March 5). Students for Fair Admissions (“SFFA”) and Indian College Admissions. Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP.

6. Standardized Credit Transfer Policies: Establish standardized credit transfer policies across educational institutions to ensure seamless transfer and application of credits toward degree programs, reducing barriers to completion and improving student retention and graduation rates. By creating linked programs of study between secondary and postsecondary education, including transferable credits, microcredentials, common course numbering, guaranteed transfer of associate degrees, and implementing reverse transfer policies that retroactively grant associate degrees to qualifying students, students can progress more smoothly and affordably toward their educational goals, and with a higher likelihood of completing a credential.

Best Practices:

- 1. Establishment of Digital and Data Stewardship Program:** Develop community-based programs that educate and train tribal community members in digital and information literacy and data stewardship. These programs should focus on empowering community members to manage their information and digital content and data effectively, ensuring they have the skills needed to protect and utilize their digital assets in ways that benefit their communities. Such programs could include workshops on generative artificial intelligence, digital rights, database administration, coding, data management practices, and the safe use of social media and other online platforms.
- 2. Develop Education-to-Employment Pathways:** Establish tailored education-to-employment pathways that directly connect educational achievements with workforce opportunities within the community. This could involve creating specialized programs in collaboration with tribal leaders and local businesses that focus on the skills most needed within the Tribe, such as environmental management, healthcare, digital technology, or traditional crafts. Education-to-employment pathways should begin in high school with dual credit opportunities and be articulated with postsecondary educational programs. Such pathways could include internships, apprenticeships, micro-credentialing, and job placements that are integrated with the educational curriculum and aligned with community needs, ensuring students can smoothly transition into relevant employment roles that support both individual and community growth.
- 3. Enhance Skills Training with Traditional Knowledge:** Integrate traditional tribal knowledge and practices with modern vocational training programs. This approach respects and preserves cultural heritage while also making education more relevant and engaging for students. Policy-makers and educators should work with tribal elders and experts to develop curricula that blend traditional skills—such as sustainable land management, traditional arts, and community governance—with contemporary career skills. This integration can make education more culturally relevant and improve job readiness, supporting both community needs and broader economic goals.
- 4. Implement Flexible Learning and Credentialing Systems:** Develop and support flexible learning systems and credentialing processes (micro-credentialing, badging, etc.) that recognize both formal education and experiential learning. Recognizing the diverse learning and working environments within tribal communities, policies should support pathways that accommodate all learners, including adult learners who may be returning to education. Credentialing systems should be adapted to recognize and certify skills acquired through community-based learning and traditional practices, enhancing employability and supporting the sovereignty of the community in defining and valuing diverse forms of knowledge and skill.

Funding/Philanthropy Recommendations:

1. **Invest in Long-term Initiatives:** Funders should consider the importance of sustained investment in long-term initiatives rather than short-term projects. Supporting programs like the ones described, which aim to increase college success and credential attainment for Native American youth, requires a commitment to long-term funding. This ensures that the programs can develop, mature, and adapt over time to meet evolving community needs and challenges.
2. **Support Capacity Building:** Philanthropic organizations should focus on strengthening the infrastructure of tribal collaboratives and community-based organizations (CBOs). Investing in capacity building can enhance these organizations' ability to deliver services, manage projects, and sustain initiatives. This includes funding for operations, professional development, technology upgrades, and the implementation of effective management practices that can amplify their impact and reach.
3. **Foster Collaborations and Partnerships:** Encourage and financially support collaborations between tribal communities, educational institutions, and other stakeholders. Funders can play a crucial role in facilitating these partnerships, which are essential for sharing resources, expertise, and best practices. Investments should aim to create networks of learning and support that connect tribal places with postsecondary partners and other CBOs to enhance the effectiveness of educational programs and interventions.
4. **Support for Indigenous-Driven Tech Solutions:** Encourage funders and philanthropic organizations to allocate grants specifically for the development of technology solutions that are designed by and for Native American communities. This funding should support initiatives such as the creation of secure digital archives for cultural, language, and historical documents, development of community-owned connectivity infrastructure, and the design of educational technologies that cater to the needs of tribal students. Prioritizing Indigenous-led projects ensures that technological development aligns with the community's values and sovereignty. Additionally, funding should be allocated to educational programs that build up a tribal community's ability to develop, maintain, and implement these tech solutions. Building up infrastructure will support career-aligned educational pathways.
5. **Promote Public and Private Investment in Indigenous Digital Sovereignty:** Strategic public and private investments would foster the development of broadband infrastructure in rural tribal areas, ensuring that Native American communities have access to reliable, high-speed internet for education, healthcare, economic development, and overall community well-being. This could include tax incentives, grants, and low-interest loans for private companies that invest in broadband infrastructure in rural tribal areas. Or, increase funding for existing federal programs such as the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) and the Broadband ReConnect Program. Finally, a dedicated fund could be established that encourages collaboration between public entities and private companies to invest in rural tribal broadband, contributing to Indigenous digital sovereignty .
6. **Invest in Belonging, Meaning, Well-Being and Purpose (BMWP):** Investing in initiatives that employ solutions centered belonging, meaning, well-being, and purpose is crucial for the holistic development of opportunity youth. By establishing dedicated funding streams, supporting program-level interventions, promoting systemic changes, expanding access to mental health services, enhancing workforce development, and rigorously evaluating impact, we can create a supportive environment where all young people can thrive. This investment will not only benefit the individual youth but also strengthen communities and society as a whole.

The general and best practices recommendations aim to create a more interconnected and supportive relationship between educational institutions and the workforce needs of tribal communities, enhancing both individual career outcomes and the overall well-being and sovereignty of the Tribes. The recommendations for funders are designed to maximize the impact of their contributions and ensure that their support effectively addresses the unique educational needs of Native American youth as outlined in AIFCS’s Indigenous initiatives.

Dreaming of a Future in a Good Way: Jemez Pueblo and Kawaiola Youth Voices

“My dream is to receive a bachelor’s in education. Ever since I was in middle school, I was infatuated with the life of a teacher, of how hard they work for the sake of future generations. With this observation, my love for school, and of course my love for children gives me the great desire to become a teacher. I am not yet sure for which area I plan to teach but I do know that to be a teacher is what I want to do in the future.”

“I want to try to see if I want to go to college and I am not sure what my career would be. My dream for the future is to have a secure job, my own home, and start a family.”

“My dream is to be a cyber-security person or an electrical engineer, or to do something with technology.”

“I wish to pursue a PhD and give back to my community that has raised me up and given me opportunities I would not have had otherwise. Particularly I wish to become a Neuropsychological Epidemiologist. Potentially the first ever with my racial and ethnic background.”

“I want to try out many different things while I’m still in College and also hope to travel across the country, I also want to get my masters and PhD, and I have many careers that I would like to try for and come back home with all the knowledge I can get and find ways to help my community.”

“After getting a high school diploma I want to go to school to become a pediatric oncology nurse. With the career, I am aiming for I want to help kids who have cancer and treat them to become healthy. I want to be a nurse because I believe kids need to be talked to with a soft voice and a soft touch especially kids who are sick, being in hospitals is scary and being a nurse really means having to be kind with kids. I have been to the cancer treatment center here in New Mexico many times as a kid with my grandma who had cancer and I remember seeing kids my age fighting to beat cancer and struggling to do certain things and after seeing that it was glued to my mind, ever since I’ve had a big heart for kids who are sick.”

“I just want to be a good dad. I learned that everything I do is going to affect my kids.”

Conclusion

The resilience of Native peoples stands as a testament to their enduring strength and cultural richness, woven into the fabric of their communities and traditions. Despite historical injustices and systemic barriers, Native and Indigenous youth are reclaiming their ancestral knowledge, integrating it with modern opportunities, and charting new paths in diverse fields that bring personal fulfillment and enhance tribal sovereignty. This unique blend of tradition and innovation promises a future where Native communities thrive, their cultural heritage is preserved, and their contributions enrich broader society. To realize this vision, we must take decisive action on the recommendations outlined in this report. By promoting equitable policies, investing in culturally responsive education, and fostering collaboration across all sectors, we can ensure that Native and Indigenous youth have the support and opportunities they need to succeed. Together, we can build a brighter, more inclusive world, honoring the past, present, and potential of Native peoples.

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