

Tribal Colleges

A Summary of:

“Building Strong Communities: Tribal Colleges as Engaged Institutions” (May 2001) American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) and the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) and the American Indian College Fund. By Alisa Federico Cunningham and Christina Redmond.

“Creating Role Models for Change: A Survey of Tribal College Graduates” (May 2000) AIHEC, IHEP, and the American Indian College Fund. By Alisa Federico Cunningham and Kenneth E. Redd.

“Tribal College Contributions to Local Economic Development” (February 2000) AIHEC, IHEP, and the American Indian College

Fund. By Alisa Federico Cunningham, Veronica Gonzales, James Merisotis, Eileen O’Brien, et al.

“Tribal Colleges: An Introduction” (February 1999) AIHEC, IHEP, and the American Indian College Fund. By Alisa Federico Cunningham, Veronica Gonzales, James Merisotis, Eileen O’Brien, et al.

Focus

- Early Childhood
- Primary School
- Middle School
- Secondary School
- ✓ Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

Overview

The first Tribal Colleges were set up in the late-1960s in the wake of the civil rights movement, and the American Indian “self-determination” movement, as a way to increase access to higher education for youth growing up on reservations. Tribal Colleges have a dual education philosophy that combines instruction in Native American language, history and culture with a general curriculum of English literature, mathematics, science and technology. The colleges are located primarily on rural reservations, so they can better serve Native American students and communities. A primary goal of Tribal Colleges is to provide higher education for Native American students without forcing assimilation into mainstream white culture. Although each institution has a unique history, every Tribal College began as a two-year institution with open admissions policies. Today, several Tribal Colleges offer four-year degrees, and a few offer graduate degrees, but the majority remain two-year institutions focusing on certificate

POPULATION

Most Tribal Colleges serve small student bodies, predominantly Native Americans living on reservations. In 1996, 61% of the students enrolled in Tribal Colleges were Native Americans. In the fall of that year, 10,234 Native American students enrolled in American tribal colleges compared with 131,902 Native American students in non-tribal institutions of higher education. More nontraditional students attend Tribal Colleges than mainstream colleges. Age, family obligations and poverty are some of the factors that make college completion difficult for those students. The average age of students at Tribal Colleges is 31.5 years old compared to an average age of 18-24 years old for traditional college students. About 85% of Tribal College students live at or below the poverty line. Half of Tribal College students attend part-time and 64% are women.

and associate degree programs. There are 32 Tribal Colleges in the U.S. and there is one in Canada.

Key Findings

Sixteen Tribal Colleges reported completion rates for the 1996-1997 school year. These colleges conferred 936 degrees, including 409 associate’s degrees, 58 bachelor’s degrees and 2 master’s degrees. Eighty-four percent of these graduates were Native Americans and 67% were women. In 1996, Tribal Colleges awarded 19% of the associate’s degrees and 10% of all certificates awarded to Native Americans.

In the mid-1990s, the Native American unemployment rate on reservations served by Tribal Colleges was 42%, compared to a national unemployment rate of approximately 6%. The unemployment rate for Tribal College graduates is lower than the rate for reservations as a whole, and the vast majority of these graduates have stayed on the reservations. Evaluators collected employment snapshots of the reservations in the table below.

In 1999, the evaluators conducted a survey of 242 Tribal College alumni, most of whom had received an associate’s degree, one year after graduation. Of the Tribal College alumni surveyed:

- ◆ Fifty-four percent were working full-time outside of the home.

“If it weren’t for Sinte Gleska I would still be ignorant of my Lakota culture. This is perhaps the strongest aspect of Tribal Colleges.”
—Graduate, Sinte Gleska University

- ◆ Thirty-two percent were attending college for a bachelor’s degree.
- ◆ Nineteen percent were working part-time outside of the home.
- ◆ Nine percent were neither working nor attending college.
- ◆ Three percent were self-employed.

Many alumni were both working and attending four-year colleges.

The average annual salary of employed survey respondents was \$15,683 in 1999. Although there is no comparable data on the average salary for all employed reservation residents, the average per capita income on Tribal College reservations (\$4,665 in 1990) offers some indication of how difficult it is to make a living wage on the reservations.

Tribal College Alumni Unemployment vs. Reservation Unemployment			
Tribal College	Alumni	Reservation	All Residents
Salish Kootenai College	14%	Flathead Res. (MT)	20%
Stone Child Community College	15%	Rocky Boy Res. (MT)	72%
Turtle Mountain Community College	13%	Turtle Mountain Res. (ND)	45%

Program Components

Cultural studies, community service, internships and business training are key components of the Tribal College curricula:

- ◆ The Tribal Colleges offer courses in tribal languages, literature and other subjects reflecting Native American culture. Without these classes traditional tribal languages might disappear. Courses are taught in ways that respect Native American cultural traditions. For

instance, Bay Mills Community College in Montana offers a tribal literature class only in the winter, because the stories are to be told only when snow is on the ground. These colleges also serve as the primary repositories of archival materials on tribal history and culture.

- ◆ In terms of community service, 22 Tribal Colleges offered adult basic education, remedial courses or high school equivalency programs to

residents in the surrounding community. North Dakota's Sitting Bull Community College, for example, runs a mobile classroom to serve the outlying areas of the reservation. Similarly, California's D-Q University has an American Indian Young Scholars Program that provides academic preparation, research experience and support services to Native American high school students interested in pursuing science careers.

- ◆ Tribal College professors work with local employers to align curricula with the career options available for graduates. Employers work through the Tribal Colleges to provide students with internships in local businesses. Tribal

“During my years attending a Tribal College, I received a lot more help than I would have if I'd attended a university. I feel that the Tribal College has given me the experience and ability to be a successful student.”

—Graduate, Dull Knife Memorial College

“Attending a tribal college gave me the courage to go back to school. The small classes and personal relationship with the teachers and professors made me want to give school a chance again. I will never forget the two years I spent at Fort Peck Community College.”

—Graduate, Fort Peck Community College

Colleges also offer business courses, leadership development workshops and technical assistance at small business centers to support Native American entrepreneurship.

- ◆ Through partnerships with local schools and federal TRIO programs, Tribal Colleges facilitate the transition from high school to postsecondary education for Native American students. Sixty percent of Tribal Colleges have articulation agreements with local high schools. Three Tribal Colleges run Talent Search programs, 6 run Upward Bound programs, and 14 offer Student Support Services.

Contributing Factors

Faculty/Staff Role Models

The Tribal Colleges make a conscious effort to hire and retain Native American faculty and staff who can serve as role models for their students. In 1995, 30% of full-time faculty and 79% of full-time staff at Tribal Colleges were Native Americans. In contrast, less than 1% of faculty and staff at all public colleges and universities were Native Americans.

Student Services

To meet the needs of nontraditional or disadvantaged students, Tribal Colleges offer a range of services such as day-care, nutrition, counseling and substance abuse.

Facilities and Funding

Despite fundraising efforts by the American Indian College Fund and funding from the departments of Education and the Interior, Tribal Colleges struggle with funds for facilities, maintenance and faculty salaries. In the 1997-98 school year, the average faculty salary at Tribal Colleges was \$30,241 compared to \$45,919 at two-year mainstream institutions and \$52,335 at all public institutions in the United States. In 1994, 30 Tribal Colleges gained status and funding as land-grant colleges. This greatly increased federal funding, but evaluators estimated that “together, the 30 land-grant Tribal Colleges receive approximately the same funding through land-grant related appropriations [as] one state land-grant university.”

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The evaluators collected quantitative and qualitative information about the effect of Tribal Colleges on Native American achievement by interviewing Tribal College faculty and administrators and by surveying Tribal College alumni one year after graduation. Evaluators mailed the survey to 965 alumni and received 242 responses. The demographics of respondents varied only slightly from the demographics of Tribal College students collected by the colleges themselves and by the U.S. Department of Education. Evaluators used comparative data from the U.S. Department of Education, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other federal agencies and departments.

EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING

Support for this study came from the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, the American Indian College Fund, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the US Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Native Americans. The Sallie Mae Education Institute co-sponsored the Alumni Survey.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

Tribal Colleges are located in Arizona, California, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington and Wisconsin.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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