Native American Students in Higher Education

Because Native Americans (both American Indians and Alaska Natives) comprise only 1% of the U.S. undergraduate population and less than 1% of the graduate population, these students are often left out of postsecondary research and data reporting due to small sample size. What data is available indicates that only 10% of Native Americans attain bachelor’s degrees and only 17% attain associate’s degrees, making the case for a system that is more responsive to the specific needs of these students.

Enrollment/Degree Attainment

- College enrollment among Native Americans aged 18- to 24-years-old fell from the 2015-16 academic year to 2016-17.
  - The higher education participation rate of Native American students went from 23% in 2015-16 to 19% in 2016-17.
- Between 2000 and 2017, the percentage of Native Americans aged 25 to 29 who had attained at least an associate’s or bachelor’s degree dropped.
  - In 2000, 30% of Native Americans aged 25 to 29 had attained at least an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. In 2017, that number fell to 27%.
- The percentage of Native Americans who had attained an associate’s degree or higher in 2017 was 27%, compared to 54% for White students.
  - 16% of Native Americans had attained at least a bachelor’s degree in 2017, compared to 42% of White students.
- Native American students are more likely to attend public versus private institutions of higher education.
  - 80% of Native American students attended public two- or four-year institutions in 2014.
- 78% of all students at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) in 2010 were considered Native American, a percentage that has increased annually.
- 8.7% of all Native American college students attended a TCU in the fall of 2010.
- Completion rates for Native American students fall below those of their White counterparts.
  - 23% of first-time, full-time Native American students attending four-year institutions beginning in 2008 graduated within 4 years, compared to nearly 44% for White students.
  - 41% of Native American students graduated within 6 years, compared to nearly 63% of White students.

Challenges

- It is difficult to track accurate college participation rates for Native American students as they are not tracked at all attainment levels.
- Native American students are more likely to need and receive federal financial assistance than White students.
  - In 2011-12, 85% of Native American students received some type of federal grant aid, compared with 69% of White students.
- 62% of Native American students take out some kind of federal student loan, compared to 56% of White students.
- Native American students are less likely to be prepared for college as they are more likely to attend high schools that offer little to no access to Advanced Placement or college prep courses.
- Native American students are also less likely to have family that have attended college.
- 63% of Native American students never talk to a school counselor during eighth grade about classes they should take in high school or about what they want to do after high school.

**SOURCES**


*Tribal Colleges and Universities*. Department of Education.

*Updated August 2018*