Tribal Colleges and Universities

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A background primer on Tribal Colleges and Universities

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), also known as tribally controlled colleges and universities, or TCCUs, are institutions of higher education formally controlled, sanctioned, or chartered by the governing body of a Native American tribe or tribes where Native American culture, language, and tradition are fostered. In 2016, 78.1% of the TCU population was Native American. In addition to students, TCUs serve a diverse group of 100,000 community members in academic and community-based programs and actively work to preserve Native American languages, promote tribal sovereignty, and further economic growth for Native American people. Because Native Americans (both American Indians and Alaska Natives) make up only 1% of the U.S. undergraduate population and less than 1% of the graduate student population, these students are often left out of postsecondary research and data reporting due to small sample size. What data is available indicates that, while 50% of Native Americans have attempted some form of higher education, only 25% have earned a degree.

After years of federal government control over tribal education at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels, tribal leaders began a political movement known as self-determination in the 1960s. Beginning with Dine College, founded in 1968 by the Navajo Nation, tribally controlled colleges grew out of this movement, establishing themselves as institutions that would sustain and grow tribal culture.

The majority of designated TCUs are located on reservations in the Midwest and Southwest (see figure below). TCUs are chartered by tribal governments and serve students from more than 230 federally recognized tribes. Many TCUs have open admission practices and, while they vary in size, focus, and location, individual tribal identity is deeply embedded in every institution. Often TCUs are the only postsecondary option for students in rural and poor communities and as such they tend to offer a broad range of social services, such as mentoring, childcare, wellness programs, and community programs, to meet student needs.

Source: American Indian College Fund Not pictured: Ilisagvik College (Alaska)
TCU Funding

State governments are not obligated to provide any financial support to TCUs and because tribal colleges are predominantly located on Native American reservations with high poverty rates, local property taxes are not collected to support them. Instead, TCUs are funded primarily through Title III of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) administered by the U.S. Department of Education and the Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act (TCCUAA) of 1978, administered by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. In 1994, the U.S. Department of Education allowed TCUs land-grant status, which provided access to additional funding sources.\[vi\]

In 2020, TCUs received a total of $65 million through HEOA, an increase of about $5 million from 2019.\[vii\] These funds allow institutions to purchase new scientific equipment, build libraries, educate students on tribal public policy, provide counseling services to improve students’ financial and economic literacy, improve facilities for internet use, support faculty development, establish or improve a program of teacher education with emphasis on teaching Native American children, and establish community outreach programs that encourage Native American children to pursue postsecondary education.

When originally passed, the TCCUAA authorized $8,000 in federal money for each Native American student enrolled in a TCU. However, due to insufficient funding, TCUs only receive $6,355 per student.\[viii\] This per-student subsidy comprises the base budget for TCUs—federal funds are not given for non-Native American students, who make up 20% of the TCU student population.

Types of Institutions

There are currently 38 designated TCUs that serve about 16,000 full- or part-time students annually.\[ix\] Of these, 34 are Title IV-eligible and accredited by mainstream accreditation organizations. The 34 Title IV-eligible TCUs awarded 1,659 associate degrees, 333 bachelor’s degrees, and five master’s degrees to American Indians/Alaska Natives in 2018–19.\[x\] While TCUs started as two-year institutions, 14 TCUs now offer bachelor’s degrees and five offer master’s degrees. In total, TCUs offer master’s degrees in four fields, bachelor’s degrees in 46 fields, associate degrees in 193 fields, and certificates in 119 fields.\[xi\]

Curricula at most TCUs focuses on the skills and knowledge needed to promote Native American nation building and strengthen tribal sovereignty. Twenty-seven TCUs offer American Indian studies degree programs, a course of study that has become increasingly popular over the last 15 years.\[xii\] The graphic below shows the popularity of majors at TCUs, with business, health care, and vocational programs making up the top three.

![Graph showing enrollment by major group at TCUs](source: American Indian Higher Education Consortium)
Successes and Impact

The impact of tribal colleges can be seen through their commitment to access, their role in improving local economies, their efforts to cultivate and maintain diverse faculty, and their outreach to the broader community.

- **Access**: As TCUs expand their degree programs, they strive to keep tuition low. The average cost of attendance at a TCU in 2012–13 was approximately $14,566 per year (including room, board, books, and tuition averaged across institutions), while the average cost of attendance across all U.S. institutions during the same time period was $20,234 per year.\[xiv\]

- **Economic Growth**: TCUs have made significant contributions in local communities by creating jobs and boosting economies. In 2013, the College of Menominee National added $37 million to the local economy, provided 404 jobs, and generated over $800,000 in tax revenue. Tribal colleges are also working hard to meet workforce demands. For example, TCUs in North Dakota are working to fill the estimated 17,000 unfilled jobs at the Bakken Formation, one of the largest single deposits of oil and natural gas found in the United States, with workers who possess the technical knowledge of resource extraction as well as the knowledge of and appreciation for tribal philosophies regarding nature and environmental protection.\[xv\]

- **Faculty Diversity**: TCUs boast a robust and diverse faculty. Nationwide, American Indians and Alaska Natives make up less than 1% of higher education faculty members. At TCUs, 46% of all faculty are Native American and Alaska Natives. This percentage doubled between 2003 and 2010.\[xvi\] The importance of Native American faculty cannot be understated: They can challenge discriminatory scholarship and practices, stimulate research on indigenous issues, and assist colleges and universities in recruiting and retaining Native American students. In addition to faculty, 71% of TCU administrators are Native American.

- **Community Outreach**: TCUs provide services to their local populations outside of the campus community. These services include diabetes education and prevention, HIV education, day care and health centers, libraries, computer centers, indigenous research, language preservation classes, community activities, and lifelong learning programs.\[xvii\]

Challenges

Critics of tribal colleges often ask why TCUs do not have better outcomes. On average, 20% of Native American students at TCUs earn four-year degrees within six years or two-year degrees within three years, one-third the national average and half the rate of Native American students at non-tribal schools. At some tribal colleges, fewer than 10% of students graduate.

Advocates of TCUs respond to this criticism by emphasizing the unique obstacles many Native American students face: 23% of all Native Americans lived in poverty in 2019, the highest poverty rate of any racial group in the U.S.\[xviii\] Eighty-five percent of students at TCUs are eligible to receive a Pell Grant, indicating financial need. Native students who enroll in higher education often face especially long commutes of between 30 and 100 miles to reach their closest college or university. And while they may be eager for a college education, many are unprepared for college work. On average, 74% of Native American students at TCUs require remedial math and 50% require remedial reading or writing.\[xx\]
Future Growth

Community advocates have many ideas on how to strengthen TCUs. Most focus on acknowledging what makes TCUs unique and providing adequate resources to allow TCUs to serve their communities in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way. Advocates point to the following ways to improve higher education outcomes for Native American students and to strengthen the capacity of TCUs to serve them:

- **Increase Funding**: Provide TCUs with the full amount of federal funding authorized under current law annually adjusted for student enrollment increases and inflation. As noted, the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act (1978) authorizes $8,000 per Native American student per year, but the program has never been fully funded.

- **Provide More Reliable Funding**: Establish sustainable funding opportunities for TCUs to apply to their base operating budgets rather than relying on grants, which can be unreliable and inhibit long-term planning and growth.

- **Create Better and More Comprehensive Pathways**: Create earlier outreach and dual-credit programs for high school students that put students on a college track. Establish transfer agreements between TCUs and four-year institutions that recognize the unique challenges Native American students face. Strengthened agreements would allow students to experience a Native undergraduate education and earn an advanced degree at a non-Native institution.

- **Changes to Accreditation**: Consider the possibility of TCUs having their own accrediting body focused on Native American values and “indigenous ways of knowing.” Allow TCUs to accredit themselves to standards they deem culturally appropriate.

Despite their challenges, TCUs work in various ways to support the students they serve and play an important role in Native American student success.

A good demonstration of the role these institutions play in the lives of their students is best told through the voices of their students. The American Indian College Fund collects stories from Native American scholarship recipients regarding their experiences, challenges, and successes. You can read several of those stories here.


Redefining Success: How Tribal Colleges and Universities Build Nations, Strengthen Sovereignty and Persevere through Challenges: https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1386&context=gse_pubs

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