

A young woman with long dark hair is looking down at a book in a library. The background shows bookshelves filled with books.

Tribal Colleges and Universities Primer

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A 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.¹ In Fall 2020, 79.7% of the TCU population was Native American.²

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.³ Because Native Americans (both American Indians and Alaska Natives) make up 1% of both the U.S. undergraduate and graduate student population, these students are often left out of postsecondary research and data reporting due to small sample size.⁴ What data is available indicates that, while 47% of Native Americans have attempted some form of higher education, only 24% have earned a degree.⁵

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,⁶ 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 1).⁷ 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.

¹ Definition and purpose drawn from the [White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education](#).

² See Table 312.50 in the [Digest of Education Statistics](#).

³ See the joint report by [ACE and CPRS \(2016\)](#).

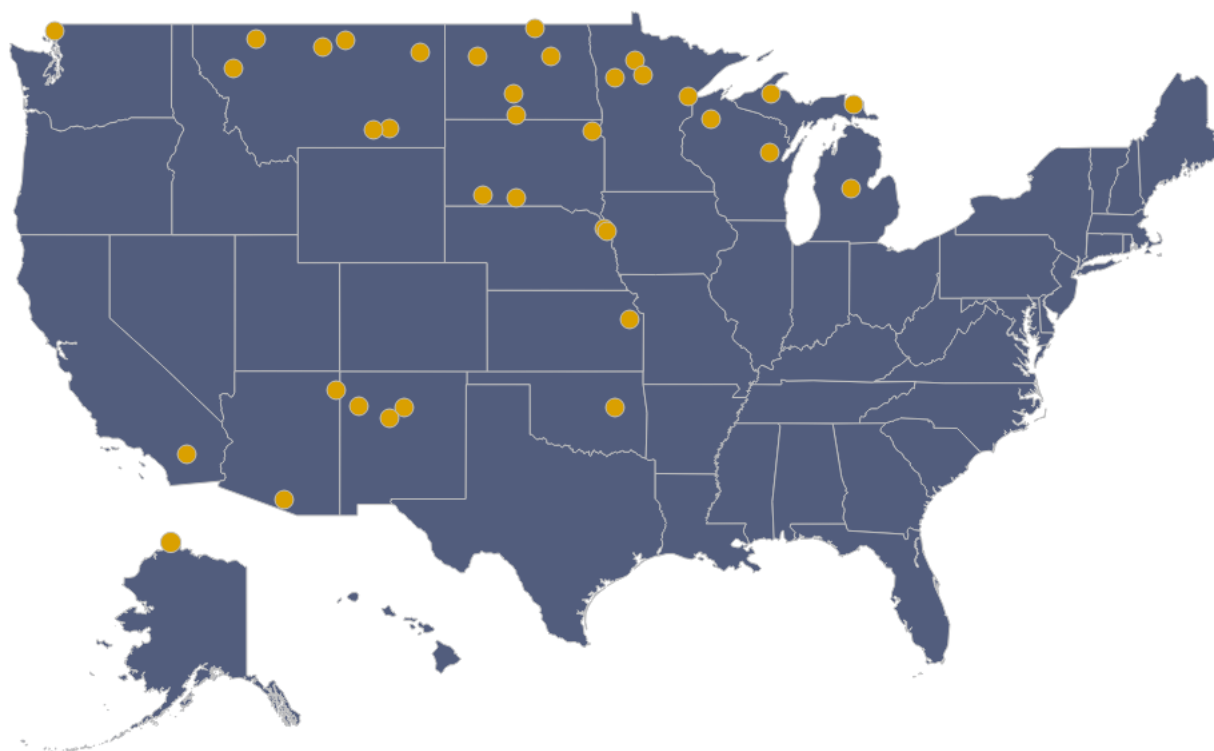
⁴ As highlighted in the [Condition of Education \(2020\)](#).

⁵ According to the [Census' American Community Survey \(2021\)](#).

⁶ See [Dine College \(2022\)](#).

⁷ Map generated using data from the [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System \(IPEDS\)](#). Stata code available upon request.

Figure 1: Map of Tribal Colleges and Universities in IPEDS



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.⁸

In FY22, TCUs received a total of \$72 million through HEOA, an increase of \$5.8 million from FY21.⁹ 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 (\$9,937 in 2022 dollars) in federal money for each Native American student enrolled in a TCU. However, due to insufficient funding, TCUs only receive \$8,676 per student.¹⁰ This per-student subsidy composes the base budget for TCUs—federal funds are not given for non-Native American students, who make up nearly 21% of the TCU student population.¹¹

⁸ See the [American Indian Higher Education Consortium \(2018\)](#).

⁹ See row 339 from the [U.S. Department of Education Budget Tables FY2022 Congressional Action](#).

¹⁰ See the appropriations request from the [American Indian Higher Education Consortium \(2022\)](#).

¹¹ See Table 312.50 in the [Digest of Education Statistics](#).

The Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted thousands of students and institutions, including TCUs. In response to financial concerns for both students and institutions, President Trump signed into law the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, more commonly known as the CARES Act, in March 2020. The CARES Act authorized \$30.75 billion for an [Education Stabilization Fund](#), including \$14 billion in the [Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund \(HEERF I\)](#).

Of the \$14 billion higher education allocation, \$12 billion is divided into two grants, both of which are issued directly to institutions: emergency financial aid grants for students and institutional grants. The [methodology](#) for institutional allocations primarily focused on an institution's Pell Grant recipient enrollment. At least 50% of an institution's allocation was required to go toward emergency financial aid grants for students, and no more than 50% of an institution's allocation can go toward institutional costs.¹²

An additional \$1 billion is directed to Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), including TCUs, through existing programs in Titles III and V. All institutions eligible to participate in any of the MSI programs in the Higher Education Act were eligible to receive these funds. HEERF I also included \$350 million directed to institutions that received less than \$500,000 in overall CARES Act funds through the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). In a letter to institutions, the Department specified that institutions may use these funds for emergency student grants to cover any component of cost of attendance or for institutional costs, such as lost revenue, reimbursement for expenses, technology costs, faculty and staff training, or payroll needs. Unlike the largest portion of HEERF I, this allocation did not require institutions to spend half of their funds on student emergency grants, though they may if they choose.¹³

To access these funds, institutions were required to submit a funding certification agreement through the Department and agree to specific reporting requirements. Thirty-five TCUs received \$50.5 million in CARES Act assistance.¹⁴ The CARES Act also enacted a temporary suspension on federal loan repayment; set interest rates on federal loans to 0%; and paused garnishing wages and collecting upon defaulted student loans. These measures have been extended multiple times by executive order. The most recent order extended the pause of repayment, interest, and collections to June 30, 2023.¹⁵

Given the need for further financial assistance to colleges and universities, President Trump then signed the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA Act) into law in late December 2020. The CRRSA Act authorized \$21.2 billion for higher education through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund II (HEERF II). These funds were used for emergency financial aid grants to students with exceptional need, such as those receiving Pell Grants, and to cover institutional costs associated with responding to the pandemic. The same 35 TCUs that received CARES Act funds received \$82.1 million in HEERF II funds.¹⁶

¹² See U.S. Department of Education's information on the [CARES Act \(2021\)](#).

¹³ See the Letter Sent to College Presidents by the [U.S. Department of Education \(2020\)](#).

¹⁴ See U.S. Department of Education's information on the [CARES Act \(2021\)](#).

¹⁵ See [U.S. Department of Education's announcement \(2022\)](#).

¹⁶ See U.S. Department of Education's information on the [CRRSAA \(2021\)](#).

A third Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF III) was created in the American Rescue Plan, signed into law in March 2021. The American Rescue Plan authorized \$39.6 billion for higher education. The 35 TCUs received \$143.1 million in HEERF III funds. While half of HEERF III funds were required to be used towards emergency financial aid grants to students with exceptional need, institutions were required to use a portion of the remaining funds to implement COVID-19 prevention or suppression methods and to advertise the use of professional judgment on financial aid awards to students.¹⁷

Institutional Type

There are currently 37 designated TCUs that serve 15,000 full- or part-time students annually. Of these, 35 are Title IV-eligible and accredited by mainstream accreditation organizations. The 35 Title IV-eligible TCUs awarded 1,354 associate degrees, 449 bachelor's degrees, and 25 master's degrees in 2020–21. While TCUs started as two-year institutions, 18 TCUs now offer bachelor's degrees and five offer master's degrees. In total, TCUs offer master's degrees in nine fields, bachelor's degrees in 19 fields, associate degrees in 33 fields, and certificates in 27 fields.¹⁸

Curricula at most TCUs focuses on the skills and knowledge needed to promote Native American nation building and strengthen tribal sovereignty. Most TCUs offer American Indian studies degree programs. Other popular majors at TCUs include liberal arts, business, and STEM fields.¹⁹

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 the 2020-21 academic year was approximately \$15,666 per year for in-state students (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 \$37,064 per year.²⁰
- **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.²¹

¹⁷ See the American Rescue Plan documentation at the [U.S. Department of Education \(2022\)](#).

¹⁸ Author's calculations of [IPEDS](#) and the list maintained by the Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education.

¹⁹ See [ACE \(2020\)](#).

²⁰ Author's calculations of [IPEDS](#).

²¹ See the [HuffPost \(2017\)](#).

- **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, 44% of all faculty are Native American and Alaska Natives.²² 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.
- **Community Outreach:** TCUs provide services to their local populations outside of the campus community. These services include health screenings, educational programs, and business development workshops.²³

Challenges

Critics of tribal colleges often ask why TCUs do not have better outcomes. On average, 22.4% of Native American students at TCUs earn four-year degrees within six years and 19.8% earn two-year degrees within three years, compared to the national averages of 60.9% of students earning four-year degrees and 36.4% earning two-year degrees. At some tribal colleges, fewer than 10% of students graduate.²⁴

Advocates of TCUs respond to this criticism by emphasizing the unique obstacles many Native American students face: 21.4% of all Native Americans lived in poverty in 2021, the second highest poverty rate of any racial group in the U.S.²⁵ Seventy-four percent of students at TCUs, compared to a national average of 41.5%, are eligible to receive a Pell Grant, indicating financial need.²⁶ 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.

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 outcomes for Native American students and to strengthen the capacity of TCUs to serve them:²⁷

- **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 (\$9,937 in 2022 dollars) per Native American student per year but in AY2021-22 TCUs had operating funds of only \$8,676 per full-time Indian student. This discrepancy is consistent, and the program has never been fully funded.²⁸
- **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.

²² See [ACE \(2020\)](#).

²³ See [ACE \(2020\)](#).

²⁴ Author's calculations using IPEDS. You can see the result in the [IPEDS Graduation Summary Table \(2022\)](#).

²⁵ According the Census' [American Community Survey \(2021\)](#).

²⁶ Author's calculations using IPEDS. You can see the result in the [IPEDS Financial Aid Summary Table \(2022\)](#).

²⁷ See [Stull et al. \(2015\)](#).

²⁸ See the appropriations request from the [American Indian Higher Education Consortium \(2022\)](#).

- **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. You can read several of those stories [here](#) and [here](#).

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