

SUPPORTING NATIVE STUDENTS

HIGHER EDUCATION ISSUE BRIEF



Native American students are a demographic group that has consistently been underrepresented in institutions of higher education (IHEs) in the United States. Despite tremendous growth in the enrollment of these students in recent years, they are still underrepresented compared to other subgroups. While other minority students encompass about 29% of all U.S. postsecondary students, Native American students account for about 1%. Postsecondary education can help Native Americans overcome many employment barriers. As stakeholders, policymakers, and higher education leaders consider their role in increasing Native American student enrollment and attainment, it is critical to understand the history, policy landscape, and innovative practices that shape this work.



CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF NATIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

In 2019, the median household income for Native populations nationally was \$49,906 compared to \$69,560 for the US at large. Nationally, 28.4% of Natives live below the poverty level, double the national average. As of December 2021, Native Americans had an unemployment rate of 7.9 percent, much higher than the national rate of 3.9 percent.

Employment opportunities are scarce in Indian country due to the small size and rural isolation of many reservations. Gaming employment sectors are limited and remain controversial among many tribes. Because of this, many Native people live in urban areas where opportunities are more plentiful.

Many of the jobs of Native people are in the public sector, as federal and tribal governments, schools, and the U.S. Public Health Services are some of the largest Native employers. However, in some states, Native peoples are often over-represented in low-wage jobs like service-maintenance, skilled craft, and administrative support. While these positions offer some job security and benefits, they are also characterized by low pay, long hours, and few opportunities for growth.

BREAKDOWN OF TERMINOLOGY

It is important to provide context to terminology used for Indigenous people. The indigenous people of the Americas are a varied people who come from different backgrounds and have different customs. Each group possesses unique cultures, and thus it is important to acknowledge this diversity that exists. The terms *American Indian*, *Native American*, *Native*, and *Indian* are acceptable and often used interchangeably in the United States.

The best practice is to call someone by the specific group of which they are a part. Native people have preferences for how they would like to be addressed and it is appropriate to ask what they would prefer.

There are also several terms used to refer to Native Peoples in other regions of the Western Hemisphere. The Inuit, Yup'ik, and Aleut Peoples in the Arctic see themselves as culturally separate from Indians. People in Hawaii are usually referred to as Native Hawaiians. In Canada, people refer to themselves as First Nations, First Peoples, or Aboriginal. In Mexico, Central America, and South America, the direct translation for Indian can have negative connotations. As a result, they prefer the Spanish words *indígena* (Indigenous), *comunidad* (community), and *pueblo* (people).

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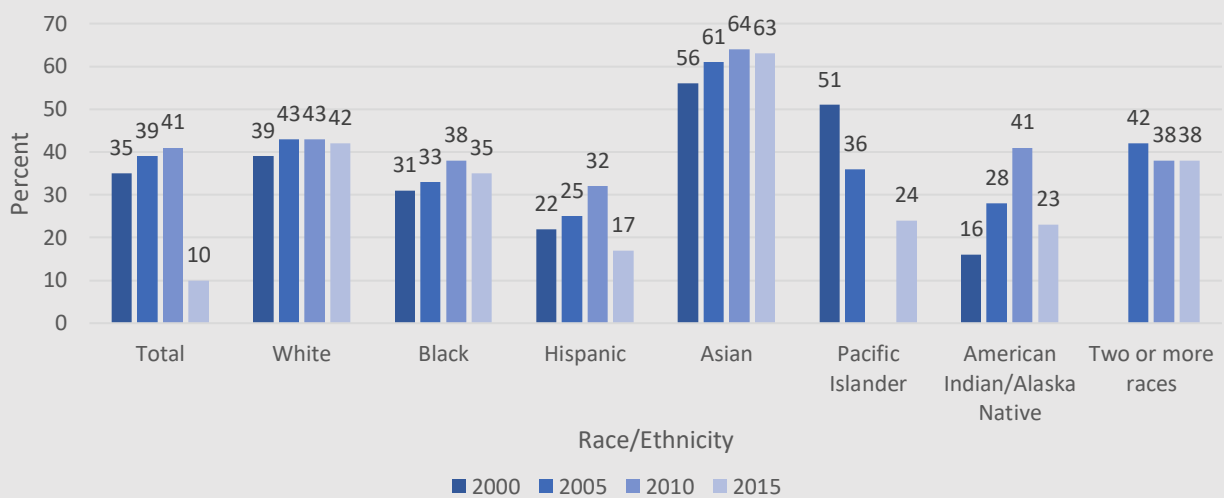
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CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF NATIVE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Several of the concerns mentioned above, such as high unemployment rates and low-wage jobs, are in large part due to the underrepresentation of Native students in Higher Education. Native American students have been underrepresented in institutions of higher education (IHEs) in the United States for centuries. Despite tremendous growth in the enrollment of these students in recent years, their enrollment still lags behind [other subgroups](#). While other non-white student groups encompass about 29% of all U.S. postsecondary students, Native American students [account for about 1%](#).

FIGURE 1. ENROLLMENT RATES OF 18- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS IN POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS



[SOURCE](#)

Roadblocks exist across the postsecondary continuum for Native students. The [immediate enrollment](#) rate for high school completers was 40% in 2015. For American Indian/Alaska Native students, that rate is nearly half the overall average at 23%. When Native students do enroll in postsecondary education, they are less likely to complete their degree than their peers. With persistence-to-graduation rates within six years for American Indians being 39%, Native students have the lowest graduation rates of any group. Additionally, gender plays a role as well [as nearly twice as](#) many Native American women earn bachelor's degrees than men. This is largely due to the desire to improve the quality of life for [their family and community](#). These factors highlight the need for more intentional supports and pathways for Native students to postsecondary success.

SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

Ensuring Native students successfully access and attain postsecondary degrees or credentials is necessary to ensure students reap their return on investment. Students who do not complete their degrees on-time are [more likely](#) to accumulate student loan debt and are not able to realize the earnings benefits that come with a postsecondary degree. However, support for Native students requires a holistic approach to ensure their unique needs are met as their Indigenous identity shapes a large part of their time at college.

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INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION (IHEs)

A key issue affecting all students is integration into IHEs, which can be alleviated by the kinds of institutional support students receive. This support can be through financial aid or access to on-campus resources. However, for Native students, the presence of American Indian support services such as cultural activities or connection with multicultural offices are especially important. [These resources help](#) Native students feel that they are welcome on campus and that the institution is welcoming of their culture. Additionally, the presence of student organizations can help these students maintain their identities while away from home, while also helping students negotiate what it means to be Native in a non-Native educational setting.



This support does not solely have to come from programming, but also from the faculty and staff who can work to help Native students. Having faculty who can sympathize with the pull these students feel to retain their [strong tribal identities](#) is very important for student retention. Faculty and staff can help students make the adjustment from high school to an IHE, as well as help them navigate different forms of negative sentiments they might face on campus from their non-Native peers. Of course, it is most beneficial to have faculty and staff who are also Native to whom students can best relate and see their experiences reflected within. Unfortunately, similar to the shortage of American Indian students in higher education, there is a deficiency of Native American faculty and staff at many universities and colleges, making it difficult for students to have this connection.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Another factor that affects Native student recruitment and retention is academic preparation. Academic preparation can range from the ability to handle tough courses and assignments to knowing how to seek help in order to succeed. The academic foundation that is forged in elementary through high school results in [definite repercussions on performance](#) and access to postsecondary education for students of any race or ethnicity. College and university settings tend to have a [very different culture](#) than that to which American Indian students are accustomed. Thus, students might feel apprehension about being prepared to handle academic rigor or engage in discussion in the classroom.

[Academic preparedness](#) varies geographically, with students who live in tribal areas reporting greater academic difficulties than those who do not. To alleviate this factor, it is important to create a college-going culture for students while they are in a high school environment. Understanding these factors is important to addressing the gap in the Native American presence in institutions of higher education (IHEs). However, it is equally important to consider factors of the institutional process that impede students from applying to and enrolling in IHEs, as well as what programming efforts are effective in addressing these factors.

FINANCIAL AID

Finances can also pose a significant barrier to American Indian student success, as many come from low socio-economic backgrounds. [The Office of Health and Human Services \(2019\)](#) reported that the general household median income stood at \$69,560 while the median for Native Americans was \$49,906. This disparity is exacerbated by the fact that the cost of postsecondary education continues to rise and outpace inflation.

Several findings demonstrate that an increase in grants and scholarships from universities and [at a state level](#) would increase persistence amongst these students. However, some Native American students may be unfamiliar with the financial aid system and process to go about applying for it. In essence, students struggle with a financial aid system that has a fundamental disconnect between its calculation of students' earnings (expected and actual) and expenses, making the true cost of education unpredictable. Further, financial aid requirements aimed at supporting student success can actually create additional barriers. For example, some scholarship requirements prohibit work during the summer or part-time work during school, but the lived reality of many Native American communities requires students to work to support their families.

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FAMILY AND TRIBAL SUPPORT

Another factor that is vital to Native student persistence is support from the student's family and tribal community. Such support often comes in the form of encouragement for students to pursue a degree to better themselves and secure gainful employment. While education has traditionally been the engine through which the assimilation and cultural genocide of Indigenous people has operated, it is now seen as a way for [Indians to improve the conditions](#) of their tribes and communities. By going through western formalized education, tribal citizens learn how to navigate the dominant culture, which is important for their people. In addition to this, students attend institutions of higher education because they feel motivated to [give back to their community](#) and as a way to [combat the disadvantageous conditions](#) in their communities. The immense support received from their communities often leads students to pursue fields such as health care or education in which they can become role models for future generations and make their community/family proud while being able to tangibly contribute.

CURRENT SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTIONS

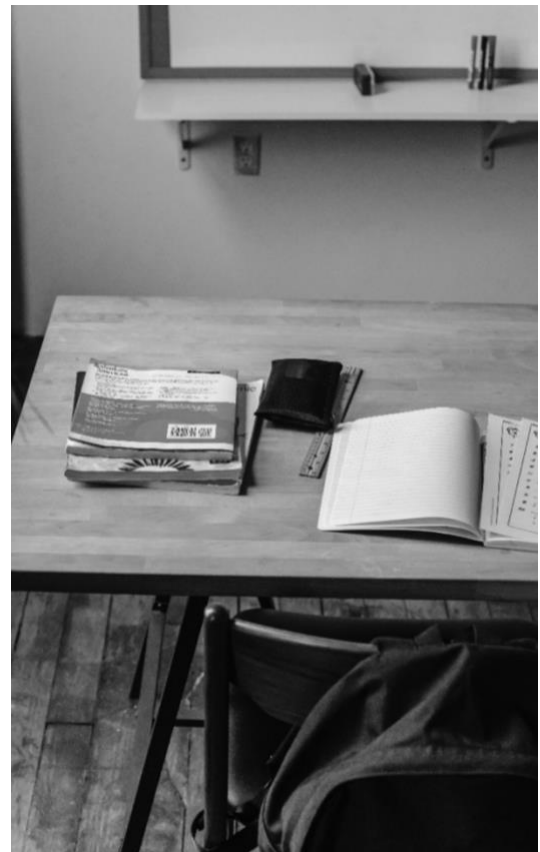
There are currently several programs and initiatives in operation that work to assist American Indian students in the pursuit of postsecondary goals.

NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS LAW & POLICY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

NCAI's Law and Policy Scholarship program aims to provide a holistic development opportunity for exceptional American Indian/Alaska Native students with significant financial need to reach their greatest potential through academic excellence, leadership development, and service. The goal of the program is to provide American Indian and Alaska Native youth opportunities to assist in their continued development as the next generation of American Indian and Alaska Native leaders and civically engaged citizens of the United States.

COLLEGE HORIZONS

[College Horizons](#), a pre-college program for Native American high school students, is open to current sophomores and juniors. This individualized program helps students select colleges suitable for them to apply to, get admitted to, and receive adequate financial aid. Of these students served by College Horizons, 99% have been admitted to college, 95% matriculate on to a four-year institution, and 85% graduate from college in four to five years. During this program, students: research their top 10 schools; complete college essays, resumes, the Common Application, and the preliminary FAFSA; and receive interviewing skills and test-taking strategies (i.e., for the ACT and SAT) as well as financial aid/scholarship information. In addition to this, the counselors and advisors for the program are indigenous in order to better relate to the students and their experiences and include various cultural activities to instill [a sense of pride as a college-going Native student](#).



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AMERICAN INDIAN COLLEGE FUND

[The American Indian College Fund](#), founded in 1989, is the largest charity dedicated to supporting Native students' access to higher education through providing scholarships, designing programming, and granting tools for success. The College Fund also supports 35 accredited tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), most of which are chartered by tribal governments and are located on or near Indian reservations. One of the major resources they provide to students is a [college-going guidebook](#) that outlines what the process is like, what resources they can seek out, and what to expect as a Native student during the college application process.

STATE TUITION WAVERS

[Many states](#) have enacted laws providing for scholarships, tuition waivers, or grant programs for Native American students. Most of these states require that students be residents of the state prior to enrolling in a state college/university and/or be a member of a tribe from that state. Some of these states include California, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Utah, and Washington. This assistance varies by state and can include provisions such as in-state tuition rates or tuition waivers. Additionally, some individual IHEs provide this as well in efforts to further support access.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

More needs to be done to increase the likelihood of Native American (NA) students' success at postsecondary institutions nationwide. Thus, here are a few considerations for how this can be achieved.

FUNDING

- States and legislatures can enact laws to provide tuition waivers to those students who have proof of tribal enrollment in order to alleviate the financial burdens that come with seeking a degree. It is important to look at the states that do this as a model for what this can look like.
- Funding can also come in the way of supporting Tribally Controlled Colleges (TCUs) as well. TCUs remain [chronically underfunded](#). This is due, in large part, to a federal formula that determines funding based on the number of American Indian or Alaska Native students they enroll, rather than the total student enrollment. Although TCUs were established to serve the academic and cultural needs of Native peoples, many enroll significant numbers of non-Native students.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOLING

Besides offering NA students sufficient financial support and diversity-oriented programs, policymakers should encourage colleges and universities to create ways in which Native Americans can connect with both the university and their home communities. A major way to do this is through [culturally responsive schooling](#). This form of pedagogy involves incorporating the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as a means for teaching them more effectively. [Doing so](#) has resulted in students experiencing:

- enhanced self-esteem
- healthy identity formation
- increased self-directiveness
- a positive influence on their tribal communities
- higher rates of academic achievement

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PROGRAMMING

History and sociocultural context matters; however, it is important how you are utilizing this knowledge to inform your [programming/planning](#). Two effective retention strategies may be the creation of collaborative programs between institutions and local/regional Indian tribes that allow students to serve their communities while earning college credit (through internships, student teaching, business, or natural resources management), and the establishment of [distance education programs](#) to allow NAs to earn a college education but remain on the Indian reservation to support their families and help their communities. It is necessary to incorporate sovereignty and self-determination in your college and career readiness programming.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How do enrollment rates for Native students compare to non-Native students?
- What institution-level policies and practices are being implemented to help Native students persist and attain degrees? What role do history and culture play in this?
- What is your region or state doing to support Native students? What best practices could be utilized to improve current efforts?
- What is the role of family and community in supporting Native students and how is this accounted for in current policies?
- Are there existing funding streams available to support Native students?

