

Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: 2020 Supplement

INVITED ESSAY

- **Bridging the Gap in Native American Attainment in Higher Education: The Role of Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions**
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This chapter is part of a larger report by the American Council on Education (ACE) titled *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: 2020 Supplement*, which follows ACE's 2019 release of *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report*. These reports, along with their accompanying microsite, provide a data-informed foundation for those working to close persistent equity gaps by providing a comprehensive review of the educational pathways of today's college students and the educators who serve them.

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Visit www.equityinhighered.org to learn more about the project and to download the full report, figures, detailed data tables, and other resources on race and ethnicity in higher education.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the ACE website. At the top left is the ACE logo with the text 'American Council on Education' and 'RACE AND ETHNICITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION'. To the right is a navigation menu with links for HOME, ABOUT, INDICATORS, DATA SOURCES, DATA TABLES, and RESOURCES. Below the navigation is a large hero section with a background image of a smiling woman. The main heading reads 'RACE AND ETHNICITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION'. Below this is a welcome message: 'Welcome! Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education provides a data-informed foundation for those working to close persistent equity gaps by providing a glimpse into the educational pathways of today's college students and the educators who serve them.' Two buttons are present: 'EXPLORE THE FINDINGS' and 'DOWNLOAD THE REPORT'. On the right side of the hero section, there are two 'Featured Findings' boxes: '40.1% of Associate Degrees were Earned by Students of Color' and '31.5% of Bachelor's Degrees were Earned by Students of Color'. Below the hero section is a section titled 'Explore the Findings' with a paragraph of text and a 'Download Reports >' link. To the right of this section is a blue box titled 'NEW: IDEAS AND INSIGHTS' with the text 'View essays, videos, podcasts, and more >' and an icon of a play button and speech bubbles.

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ACE is a membership organization that mobilizes the higher education community to shape effective public policy and foster innovative, high-quality practice. As the major coordinating body for the nation's colleges and universities, our strength lies in our diverse membership of more than 1,700 colleges and universities, related associations, and other organizations in America and abroad. ACE is the only major higher education association to represent all types of U.S. accredited, degree-granting institutions: two-year and four-year, public and private. For more information, please visit www.acenet.edu.

Bridging the Gap in Native American Attainment in Higher Education: The Role of Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions

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Introduction

Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) play a crucial role in meeting the educational needs of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students throughout the country. First designated as a type of minority serving institution (MSI) in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, they and other MSIs “contribute to the upward income mobility of the students they enroll, propelling their lowest income students up the income ladder at higher rates” (Espinosa, Taylor, and Kelchen 2018). Moreover, NASNTIs are concentrated in geographic areas that are characterized as rural, remote, or small cities—areas that have a paucity of educational resources. Many are located adjacent to Indian reservations, and they are the institutions of choice for Native students who wish to remain close to their home communities.

Like other MSIs, NASNTIs are eligible to receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education to plan, develop, and carry out activities to improve and expand capacity to serve their specific minority population and low-income individuals on their campuses. To be eligible for this designation, public and private nonprofit institutions of higher education must have an undergraduate enrollment of at least 10 percent AI/AN students and qualify for Title III funding under the U.S. Department of Education. In 2020, there were 37 institutions eligible for NASNTI designation; most are public, with a mix of two-year and four-year institutions.¹ Collectively, the 37 NASNTIs enrolled over 78,000 undergraduates in 2018, 19 percent of which were AI/AN students.²

This essay describes the current landscape of postsecondary attainment of AI/AN students, collective efforts of NASNTIs to expand the knowledge base of promising practices that advance AI/AN student success, and examples of efforts³ at NASNTIs to increase educational attainment rates through the identification of best practices for Native student success.

The Challenge of Postsecondary Success for American Indian/Alaska Native Students

American Indian/Alaska Native populations are among the most economically disadvantaged and educationally underserved populations in the United States. The legacy of federal Indian policy to erase American Indian identity and culture through the termination of tribes and forced assimilation severely impacted AI/AN people and their tribal communities (Brayboy et al. 2012; Deloria and Wildcat 2001). Historically, the education system for AI/AN people has been complicit in these assimilation policies: the government removed children from their homes and communities, sending them to distant boarding schools to break up tribal life and assimilate

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1 The number of NASNTIs comes from three sources: College Scorecard; the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Title III Native American Serving, Nontribal Institutions; and MSI allocations under the CARES Act, April 2020.
2 Authors' own calculation of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System 2018 fall enrollment survey.
3 The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's (WICHE) Native-Serving Institutions Initiative supported these efforts, which were funded by a three-year grant from Lumina Foundation.

children into European American society. Today the lasting social and economic impacts of federal Indian policy are seen in high rates of unemployment and poverty, lack of health care, and low rates of educational attainment in AI/AN communities.

These disparities in educational achievement begin in the early grades and continue throughout the educational pipeline, with 74 percent of AI/AN students graduating from public high schools compared with the national average of 85 percent (NCES, n.d.a). Even though the number of AI/AN students enrolling in postsecondary institutions is increasing, they remain the most underrepresented group in higher education, and are the least likely to earn a bachelor's degree (NCES, n.d.b). In fact, about one out of every three AI/AN students enrolled in postsecondary education will complete a bachelor's degree (NCES, n.d.b). Many of those who enroll and do not complete often return to communities with three times the average poverty rate of White communities, struggling to repay debts incurred during their first entry into postsecondary education. This loss is amplified in tribal communities that need college-educated professionals who will contribute to the well-being and sustainability of their sovereign nations.

The unique background and experiences of AI/AN students are not acknowledged or well understood. Too often, these students are relegated to a footnote or asterisk at the bottom of reports on underrepresented groups, leading many scholars to decry the invisibility of Indigenous issues in higher education (First Nations Development Institute and Echo Hawk Consulting 2018). By examining barriers to student success, as well as the institutional practices and policies that contribute to those barriers, some NASNTIs are implementing culturally responsive practices to better serve Native students. As effective culturally responsive practices are developed and shared among institutions serving Native students, greater visibility is brought to the unique needs of AI/AN students in higher education.

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High-Impact Practices at Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions

Networks and communities of practice are essential partners when advocating for policies that support NASNTIs' efforts to increase AI/AN student attainment in higher education.

In recent years, and with the support of Lumina Foundation, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's (WICHE) Native-Serving Institutions Initiative launched a consortium to build networks, tailor specific strategies, and speak with a strong and common voice on legislative and policy matters for NASNTIs. The collaboration fosters the sharing of effective practices to address common goals for AI/AN students, such as increasing attainment rates, reducing disparities between AI/AN and majority students, and working with tribal governments. In order to share and propel best practices for Native student attainment, 11 NASNTIs received planning grants to implement high-impact practices (Kuh 2008).

The network and communities of practice created through the consortium allowed for NASNTIs to blend traditional high-impact practices with culturally relevant approaches. The following examples detail practices that have emerged during the initiative, illustrating the variety of activities that can be implemented to support AI/AN students and other minority populations.

High-impact practices are learning activities that lead to greater engagement and retention among undergraduate students (Kuh 2008). Building on Kuh's research, the Association of American Colleges and Universities identified 10 practices that have a high impact on student learning and success. They include (1) first-year seminars and experiences, (2) common intellectual experiences, (3) learning communities, (4) writing-intensive courses, (5) collaborative assignments and projects, (6) undergraduate research, (7) diversity/global learning, (8) service learning and community-based learning, (9) internships, and (10) capstone courses and projects.

Community-Based Learning and Internships

San Juan College (SJC), a community college in New Mexico, forged partnerships with different tribal industries, such as the Navajo Agricultural Products Industry (NAPI), to make degree attainment relevant to tribal economic development. NAPI was developed in the 1970s by the Navajo Nation Council as a Navajo-owned enterprise to create employment. Today it is one of the largest employers in the Navajo Nation and one of the largest contiguous farmlands in the United States, providing products in the U.S. and internationally (NAPI, n.d.). NAPI expanded internship opportunities to SJC students majoring in business, accounting, marketing, and computer science, in addition to the traditional biology, geology, and horticulture internships. In order to increase participation for students that do not have transportation, SJC is also creating more service learning and internship opportunities for students on campus. SJC's partnership with these industries is an opportunity for Native students to make meaningful contributions and give back to their communities.

Learning Communities and Common Intellectual Experiences

Northeastern State University (NSU) in Oklahoma created a reserved section of its University Strategies course for American Indian students, with students enrolled in a course called Native Scholars. The curriculum incorporates cultural programs and information about support programs on campus and in the community for Native students. Additionally, the Center for Tribal Studies at NSU is developing common intellectual and educational experiences that are more consistent with AI/AN cultural practices, values, and educational models to increase student engagement, such as an Indigenous Living Learning Community. Students in the Native Scholars course and living-learning community have higher retention rates compared with students at NSU who are eligible but not participating in these programs. The most successful aspect of the learning community was the Native Scholars' dinners, which brought together students, faculty, and staff to facilitate the development of relationships and community building.

Use of ePortfolios

Kodiak College, a public two-year community college campus of the University of Alaska, Anchorage, integrated high-impact practices into a preexisting program by implementing the use of ePortfolios into its Alutiiq Studies program. This program provides students with career preparation and professional development in Alutiiq culture and values, while earning an occupational endorsement certificate (OEC) in Alutiiq language. Culturally relevant ePortfolio templates were created for AI/AN students, which enabled them to share their work with others, take an electronic resume on job searches, or use it in cultural activities in a way that acknowledges their ancestral stories. These efforts will inform Kodiak's development of a second OEC in Alaska Native community development, which will address specific workforce needs and high-demand training sought after by local tribal, nonprofit, and business organizations.

Diversity Learning

Montana State University-Northern (MSU-N), through its Little River Institute (LRI), aimed to increase American Indian retention and program completion rates. LRI increased academic and social engagement opportunities for students, faculty, and staff through mentoring, tutoring, and developing culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. Professional development opportunities provided for LRI tutors and faculty use Roland Tharp's "Standards for Effective American Indian Pedagogy" as the foundation to develop cultural responsiveness. Activities include a presentation of American Indian history and training on cultural sensitivity during staff/faculty orientation with guest lectures from Native faculty members. MSU-N provides evidence-based professional development to their faculty through individualized, one-on-one sessions with curriculum experts to fine tune the curricula to better serve and support AI/AN students. Efforts at LRI have resulted in retention rates for AI/AN students that increased from 57 percent in 2016 to 86 percent in 2019.⁴

4 MSU-N, "Planning Grant Report for WICHE Native-Serving Institutions Initiative," April 15, 2019, unpublished report.

Developing Effective Policy and Practice: Building Relationships with Tribal Nations and Engaging Communities

In addition to the development and implementation of high-impact practices like those illustrated above, NASNTIs are leaders in developing culturally responsive promising practices that support AI/AN student success, incorporating AI/AN families in the college-going experience, developing relationships and partnerships with tribal communities, and advocating for state policy to support AI/AN students. NASNTI efforts in state and federal policy are particularly notable since no policy or advocacy organization represents NASNTIs in the same way that, for example, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities represents Hispanic-Serving Institutions.⁵

The following culturally responsive promising practices and policies highlight some of the efforts of NASNTIs to increase AI/AN student success.

Promising Practices

Utah State University (USU) sought to increase family support and understanding of the college experience, as well as generally build a more engaged campus responsive to the unique values, needs, and perspectives of Native American students. In response, the Family Engagement Project at the USU Blanding campus is building relationships with Native students' families and communities by employing staff liaisons at satellite locations. The project also engages in institutional outreach to remote areas of the Navajo Nation. These efforts are focused on demystifying the college experience for American Indian students, for example, by providing assistance in navigating the complex federal and state financial aid processes for tribal families. A partnership with Navajo Health Services provides emotional and mental health support for all Native students, with particular attention to first-year students in transition to college.

East Central University (ECU) of Oklahoma has partnerships with eight tribal communities to support American Indian students at the university. ECU's Tribal Resources to Enhance Achievement and Completion in Higher Education (REACHE) complements existing effective services and programs, while identifying and establishing new resources and activities to successfully close attainment gaps for Native students. As part of a two-year planning phase, ECU is hosting meetings, AI/AN student focus groups, and Tribal Forums to generate data to assist ECU in determining appropriate and effective first-year experiences, internship structures, Tribal workforce opportunities, and fields of study responsive to Native students. Additionally, this plan seeks to create a Sovereignty Center on campus, a center dedicated to Native students' needs. Although early in the change process, these activities show promise to increase student and faculty engagement in improving student success.

State Policy

In Montana, the Indian Education for All Act, passed in 1999, encourages every Montana citizen, whether Indian or non-Indian, to learn about the unique heritage of American Indians. The act requires that every educational agency and all educational personnel work cooperatively with Montana tribes, or those tribes that are in close proximity, when providing instruction, implementing an educational goal, or adopting a rule related to the education of each Montana citizen. It recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians and requires educators to integrate American Indian history and content into all educational instruction. The College of Education at MSU-N is leading the effort to graduate teachers that can provide appropriate cultural context of historical American Indian knowledge in K–12 classrooms in Montana.

⁵ While the American Indian Higher Education Consortium represents the interests of Tribal Colleges and Universities, it does not advocate for NASNTIs specifically. For more information on Tribal Colleges and Universities, see Chapter 2 of this report.

These are just a few examples that illustrate how NASNTIs are strengthening their ties to tribal governments and communities. These relationships are essential to their success in closing AI/AN student attainment gaps and important to developing institutional practices inclusive of formal tribal representation and involvement.

Conclusion

With their high percentage of AI/AN students, NASNTIs are well positioned to contribute to our understanding of effective practices for improving AI/AN student attainment. From curricular development to workforce preparation, these efforts illustrate the variety of approaches available when supporting AI/AN student success.

Engaging with the work of NASNTIs is a unique opportunity to invite these long unrecognized and unrepresented institutions to become communities of common policy and practice, building networks of shared purpose and the capacity for a collective impact on increasing AI/AN student completion. While much work remains, especially in the area of developing effective federal and state policies to support their efforts, these institutions are building on their strengths and utilizing their collective expertise to better serve their unique student populations.

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