

NATIVE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

117th Congress

ADVANCING POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITY FOR NATIVE STUDENTS

The National Indian Education Association (NIEA) supports high-quality academic and cultural education opportunities that prepare American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians for future success.

NATIVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Native enrollment in higher education has more than doubled since 1976 due to an increase in access and opportunity for Native students.

- The total full-time undergraduate enrollment rate for Native students in 2018 was 129,000.¹
- Tribal Colleges and Universities enroll approximately 12,800 Native students full time and 14,100 are enrolled in Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions.²
- Twenty-five percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives over the age of 25 hold an associate's degree or higher.³
- Fifty percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives 25 years or older have taken higher education coursework.⁴

Where do Native Students Attend School?



BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FACED BY NATIVE STUDENTS

Despite significant strides in recent decades, Native students face consistent and often artificial barriers to entry, funding, retention, and graduation. These obstacles have led to the lowest college participation rates in the nation, at 19 percent.⁵ Likewise, the six-year college graduation rate for American Indian and Alaska Native students is 39 percent, the lowest of any group in the United States.⁶

>> ACADEMIC BARRIERS



The high school completion rate for Native students is 75 percent, as compared to a national average of 93 percent.⁷ This immediately limits opportunities for roughly a quarter of Native students; K-12 schools that serve a high number of Native students often lack the resources to have robust college preparatory programs.

>> ECONOMIC BARRIERS



87 percent of full-time undergraduate Native students receive financial aid. In a 2019 report, 34 percent of tribal college students worried that they would run out of food before their next paycheck and 28 percent reported that they had run out of food and not been able to buy more in the past year.⁸ After graduation, Native students face the highest unemployment rates in the nation at 11 percent compared to 4 percent for white adults.⁹ As a result, high-quality financial aid options that do not leave Native students with large debts to repay are critical to ensuring college persistence, completion, and post-college success.

>> INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS:



Institutions of higher education often fail to adequately support Native students who come from communities unlike the one in which they study. Staff and students often lack basic knowledge regarding Native nations, sovereignty, and the federal trust responsibility, which creates gaps when fulfilling the basic needs of Native students, from developing a cultural center, communicating with tribal education agencies, or supporting student aid for Native students. With oftentimes few American Indian or Alaska Native classmates and a lack of instructional support for culture and community, Native students are prevented from flourishing.

>> ACCOUNTABILITY BARRIERS:



High-quality data is critical to advancing institutions and services that support the unique needs of Native students. However, due to small sample sizes and federal guidelines for national surveys, Native students are often excluded from federal datasets and reports related to postsecondary completion and success. In 2007, the federal government limited federal data related to Native communities to those who identify exclusively as American Indian or Alaska Native, excluding 57 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native citizens from being identified as Native in federal data collections. This contributes to the erasure of Native students in our federal data sets and accountability systems, particularly as the number of multi-racial Native students continues to grow. (See data factsheet for more).

Equity in higher education for Native students requires immediate action to remove these obstacles by:

- Strengthening the pipeline to college for Native students through investments in the K-12 education system.
- Increasing financial support for low-income Native students who have been accepted to college.
- Increasing the investment in Tribal Colleges and Universities, which provide culturally-responsive curriculum and support, including financial support, to Native students.
- Increasing and improving investment in and oversight of Native American-Serving Non-Tribal Institutions (NASNTIs) to expand and improve their capacity to serve Native students.

¹ Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. P.115.

² Please note that data in this section includes American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students as reported by the Integrated Postsecondary Data System to provide a full landscape of Native postsecondary enrollment in the United States. This significantly reduces the data for Tribal Colleges and Universities, which serve approximately 10 percent of full time enrolled American Indian and Alaska Native students.

³ Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. P.163.

⁴ Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. P.163.

⁵ Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. P.91.

⁶ Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. P.vi.

⁷ Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. P.110.

⁸ Preserving Culture and Planning for the Future: An Exploration of Student Experiences at Tribal Colleges: 2019. Center for Community College Student Engagement. P. 8.

⁹ Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. P.vii.