

# ED467847 2002-01-00 Tribal Colleges: An Overview. ERIC Digest.

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## Tribal Colleges: An Overview. ERIC Digest.

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INTRODUCTION

Building on the momentum of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, American Indian leaders began to conceive of tribally controlled institutions of higher education that would support efforts for Indian self-determination and strengthen tribal culture without assimilation (Boyer, 1997). Dine College (formerly Navajo College) was the first tribally controlled college chartered in 1968 by the Navajo Nation in Arizona. Other tribal colleges quickly followed. Today 32 Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in the United States are members of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). All TCUs offer associate degrees, four colleges offer bachelor's degrees, and two offer master's degrees. In addition, many TCUs collaborate with regional universities through distance education and articulation agreements, offering students access to additional courses and advanced degrees. Each Tribal College is accredited or in the process of becoming accredited, giving students opportunities to transfer to four-year institutions and meeting the standards required by accrediting agencies in their particular region of the United States.

TCUs provide postsecondary access to American Indian students who might not otherwise participate in higher education. Stein (1999) writes that Tribal College students represent the smallest, poorest and most underrepresented minority group in higher education. This Digest provides a brief overview of TCUs and a list of resources.

## AMERICAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM (AIHEC)

In 1972, the presidents of the first six TCUs formed the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC, 1999). AIHEC now represents 32 TCUs in the United States and one Canadian institution and is jointly governed by representatives from each member institution. AIHEC offers technical assistance to new and struggling colleges and leads efforts in the development of TCUs. AIHEC's (1999) stated mission is to support the network of TCUs and the national movement for self-determination. In so doing, AIHEC has identified the following objectives:



\* Maintain standards of quality in American Indian education



\* Assure participation in the foundation and administration of educational legislation, policy, rules, regulations, and budgets



\* Assist TCUs in establishing a secure financial base



\* Encourage greater participation of American Indians in higher education policy

## CURRICULUM AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

TCUs generally serve geographically isolated American Indian populations living on or near reservations and offer curricula and programs that respond to community needs. In addition to offering vocational certificate programs and two-year associate degrees in arts, science and applied science, TCUs offer curricula that reflect the cultures of chartering tribes. This includes courses in tribal languages, literature, history and other traditional tribal subjects (AIHEC, 1999). TCUs also provide critically needed services to support the surrounding community such as libraries, health care facilities, support for entrepreneurial and economic development, and cultural preservation projects (American Indian College Fund, 2001). Moreover, TCUs have become repositories of tribal knowledge and oral histories and many library facilities house tribal archives. Most administrators are American Indian, and most faculty members are non-Indian (Pavel et al., 1998).

## FUNDING

TCUs are in a unique funding situation. They do not receive funding from state governments due to their status as trust territories, and tribal governments cannot levy property taxes. As a result, TCUs rely heavily on federal funds for core operational funding. This is in accord with treaty obligations and trust responsibility between sovereign Indian tribes or nations and the U. S. government. Most funding comes from the Tribally Controlled College and University Assistance Act of 1978 (TCCUAA) which is administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Funds, primarily from Title I, are allocated to 25 of the colleges based on the number of Indian students from federally recognized tribes that are enrolled. In 1996, the FTE (full-time equivalent) was \$2,900 per full-time enrolled Indian student (Pavel et al., 1998). According to Stein (1999), this amount should be kept in perspective when compared with the national average cost for mainstream nonresident community colleges, which operate at \$7,000 per FTE. TCUs must make up for shortages in funding by charging tuition averaging \$1,950 per year (AIHEC, 2001), a prohibitive cost to some students.

Other sources of funding for tribal colleges include the 1996 White House Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities (No. 13021), which elevated the status of TCUs by requiring federal departments and agencies to develop specific strategies to support TCUs, and federal legislation providing land-grant status to tribal colleges. Having status as a land-grant institution means that Tribal Colleges have access to resources that can be invested in additional faculty and/or equipment to conduct agricultural research either independently or in collaboration with four-year institutions (Pavel et al., 1998). Tribal colleges also receive funding from a variety of philanthropic and corporate organizations.

## TRIBAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

The average age of a Tribal College student is 30, and women outnumber men. It is estimated that 85% of Tribal College students live at or below poverty levels (American Indian College Fund, N.D.). According to AIHEC (1999) many Tribal College students:



\* Have children and are head of their household



\* Live at home



\* Have jobs outside of school.



\* Are the first in their families to go to college

Non-Indian students comprise 15 to 20 percent of the student population of TCUs. More than 40% of Tribal College graduates pursue further education, and another 50% find jobs, even in areas of high unemployment (AIHEC, 2000).

Tribal College students "stop-out" or skip semesters more frequently than traditional undergraduates at mainstream community colleges. A study by Red Leaf (1999) showed that family responsibilities, lack of financial support and employment were primary reasons for stopping out of college. Employment is often needed to provide for family needs. Despite high levels of stopping out, most participants planned to continue their education beyond the Tribal College to pursue their career goals.

## TCUS AND LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

TCUs engage in the development of local economies in both direct and long-term ways. According to AIHEC (2001), TCUs contribute directly to local economies through institutional spending, job creation by the college or university, by the provision of services to the local community. Long-term effects result from institutional missions to provide workforce development in a local context. Students who graduate from TCUs often seek employment within the community since the technical and degree programs offered at TCUs are specific to the needs of the tribal and/or community. One example of Tribal College engagement in local development is through collaboration with the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), a national project that works with community colleges in specific distressed rural areas. Six Tribal Colleges are receiving help through

RCCI in order to develop small businesses that are compatible with tribal culture and resources.

## SUMMARY

TCUs are unique institutions that provide educational, cultural, emotional, and monetary support for Indian students while at the same time bolstering community efforts for cultural revitalization, health and social needs, and economic development. While TCUs share many characteristics with mainstream community colleges, they are distinguished by a dual mission to perpetuate traditional tribal culture and provide certificates or two-year degrees that will enhance student's employment opportunities and facilitate transfer to four-year institutions.

## RESOURCES ON TRIBAL COLLEGES

Alaska Native Knowledge Network <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu>  
American Indian College Fund [www.collegefund.org](http://www.collegefund.org)

American Indian Higher Education Consortium <http://www.aihec.org>

The Rural Community College Initiative <http://www.mdcinc.org/rcci/>

Tribal College Journal [www.tribalcollegejournal.org/](http://www.tribalcollegejournal.org/)

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