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Boosting Postsecondary Attainment

for American Indian and Alaska Native Students

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Executive Summary

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students continue to have some of the lowest high school graduation and postsecondary attainment rates in the nation. There are a variety of factors that lead to inequitable outcomes for these students. They typically face significantly higher levels of student need, as they are more often low-income and are more likely to have multiple adverse childhood experiences. They also experience greater levels of geographic isolation and lack access to broadband as well as rigorous high school courses that are most predictive for postsecondary success.

The education of American Indian and Alaska Native populations and Tribal Nations in the United States is unlike any other. It is rife with logistical challenges and complicated by a painful legacy of forced assimilation at Indian boarding schools. Efforts to improve educational outcomes for AI/AN students must confront this history and be co-developed with Indigenous peoples and Tribal Nations to ensure initiatives are centered on the needs of their communities.

To improve postsecondary attainment for the Nation's First Students, policymakers and institutions of higher education must work together to build stronger postsecondary pathways.

Policymakers Can:

- Provide state grants to teacher prep programs to develop teacher residency and fellowship programs to diversify the teacher workforce.
- Explicitly authorize Bureau of Indian Education schools and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) to participate in dual enrollment and dual credit programs and enact policies to ensure TCUs are eligible for reimbursement.
- Increase federal funding for TCUs and allocate state education funds to TCUs.

Educators Can:

- Create partnerships between institutions of higher education and school districts and tribal communities to diversify the teacher workforce through Grow Your Own Educators programs.
- Embed culturally responsive education into classrooms.
- Create welcoming campus cultures with Native student support centers that maintain a dedicated space for AI/AN students and hire tribal liaisons to uphold productive relationships with local tribal communities.

Introduction

The past two decades have been marked by academic progress. The national high school graduation rate has increased from 71 percent in 2001 to an all-time high of 85.8 percent in 2019. In the last decade alone, the high school graduation rate increased by 6.6 percentage points since 2011, while the postsecondary attainment rate has jumped 10 percentage points to a record high of 51.3 percent in 2018. This progress has been spurred in part by concerted efforts of the GradNation campaign at the high school level and Lumina Foundation's goal of a 60 percent postsecondary attainment rate by 2025.

Yet, more progress is needed as the nation remains off-track to meet its high school and postsecondary attainment goals. Furthermore, these gains only matter if they include all students, which is why in recent years, both Lumina's Stronger Nation and the GradNation Campaign, convened by America's Promise Alliance's, the Alliance for Excellent Education, Civic, and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, have redoubled efforts to ensure educational equity. Here, too, the news is encouraging. From 2000 to 2014, Hispanic student postsecondary enrollment more than doubled while postsecondary enrollment for Black students nearly doubled over that same period (Balfanz et al., 2016). Moreover, in 2018, middle- and low-income high school graduates enrolled in postsecondary institutions at the same rate as their high-income peers for the first time.

Emerging research has painted a clearer picture of predictors of student success beyond high school, helping to build stronger postsecondary pathways. A 2016 report by Civic and the Everyone Graduates Center showed that while the conversation focuses on test scores, high school GPA and college-ready high school course-taking were the strongest predictors of success in college.

Still, these gains have not materialized for all students, including American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students, who continue to have some of the lowest high school graduation and postsecondary attainment rates in the nation.[1] In 2019, the high school graduation rate for AI/AN students was just 74.3 percent. Similarly, less than one in four (24.6 percent) AI/AN students hold at least an associate degree, an increase of under one percentage point over the past five years.

The education of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations and Tribal Nations in the United States is unlike any other. It is rife with logistical challenges and complicated by a painful legacy of forced assimilation at Indian boarding schools. Efforts to improve educational outcomes for AI/AN students must confront this history and be co-developed with Indigenous peoples and Tribal Nations to ensure initiatives are centered on the needs of their communities.

This work is made more difficult by the coronavirus that has ravaged the United States, particularly impacting Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and reshaping the educational landscape of this country. Undergraduate admissions fell 13 percent in the fall of 2020, as campuses and students continued to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evidence points to this particularly impacting historically underserved populations, including AI/AN students, especially those on Tribal lands. These students are more likely to lack broadband or the necessary devices to fully engage in distance learning. A recent analysis by the Alliance for Excellent education with the National Indian Education Association, the National Urban League, and UnidosUS found that 34 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students do not have high-speed internet at home. Furthermore, almost 16 percent of AI/AN families do not own a computer (*Students of Color*, 2020). This lack of connectivity severely impeded Bureau of Education (BIE) schools as they attempted to make the shift to distance learning.

This brief will explore the specific context and challenges that AI/AN students face graduating high school and attaining a postsecondary degree. It will focus on how educational attainment can be improved for these students in a way that is culturally affirming and beneficial not only for individual students but also for their Tribal Nations.

[1] This report refers to students with Native and Indigenous heritage as American Indian and Alaska Native students, consistent with the National Center for Education Statistics and the Bureau of Indian Education.

The Historical Context

The legacy of AI/AN education in the United States continues to impact the relationship these communities and Tribal Nations have with schools across the country. Beginning in the late 18th century and continuing into the 19th century, the United States government utilized Native American boarding schools to forcibly assimilate AI/AN children and youth into European-centric culture, while eradicating Native and Indigenous cultures. One estimate indicates up to 83 percent of AI/AN school-age children attended boarding schools in 1926 (*First-year Persistence*, 2020). These children were sometimes forcibly removed from their families to attend schools hundreds of miles away.

This resulted in an understandable distrust of American schooling by Native communities. This lack of trust makes present day schools feel unwelcoming to Native and Indigenous students, which, in turn, impacts their attendance rates. American Indian and Alaska Native students are chronically absent at rates that outpace any other subgroup (*Chronic Absenteeism*, 2019).

Any efforts aimed at meaningful increases in educational outcomes, including postsecondary attainment, must confront this legacy of systemic racism. This work should be focused on rebuilding trust between the AI/AN community and the U.S. education system with culturally reaffirming practices centered on meeting the needs of Tribal Nations and villages.

Following this period of forced assimilation, Native and Indigenous tribes sought more agency in the education of their children. This led to a period described as self-determination characterized by Native Nations establishing their own schools. In 1966, Rough Rock Demonstration School opened in the Navajo Nation in Arizona, the first modern Indian-controlled school. Two years later, in 1968, the Navajo tribal council passed a resolution founding Navajo Community College, today known as Diné College, the first tribal college.

Soon after, all tribes sought agency in education. In 1975, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act granted tribes the autonomy to run their own schools and prioritize local needs in government services. Previously, the federal government handled all contracts and federal service provisions to Indian tribes. The Self-Determination Act changed that by requiring the federal government to contract directly with Indian tribes for these services, which allowed the tribes to handle their own affairs for the first time.

Indian schools, however, remained chronically underfunded and increasingly sought legislative solutions. In 1972, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) was founded to lobby the federal government for operating assistance for Indian colleges, and it quickly engaged in legislative advocacy for federal assistance to Indian schools. This led to the passage of the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act in 1978, which authorized the Secretary of the Interior to make grants to tribally controlled community colleges. Today, there are 35 tribal colleges in 13 states and the BIE oversees 183 schools across 23 states.

It is also important to note the unique relationship between Native Nations and the U.S. Government. Tribal Nations are recognized as sovereign nations as a result of treaty agreements with the U.S. government. Under these agreements, the federal government agrees to provide for Native Americans' basic needs, including education. This legal relationship sets American Indians apart from any other group in this country.

The Educational Experience of Native American Students

High School Graduation Rates

Nearly 500,000 AI/AN students (490,000) were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States in the fall of 2018, the last year for which data is available. AI/AN students comprised about one percent of elementary students (ages 5 to 17) and postsecondary students (ages 18 to 24) who are U.S. residents, which are similar to their student population percentages in 2000 (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2020).

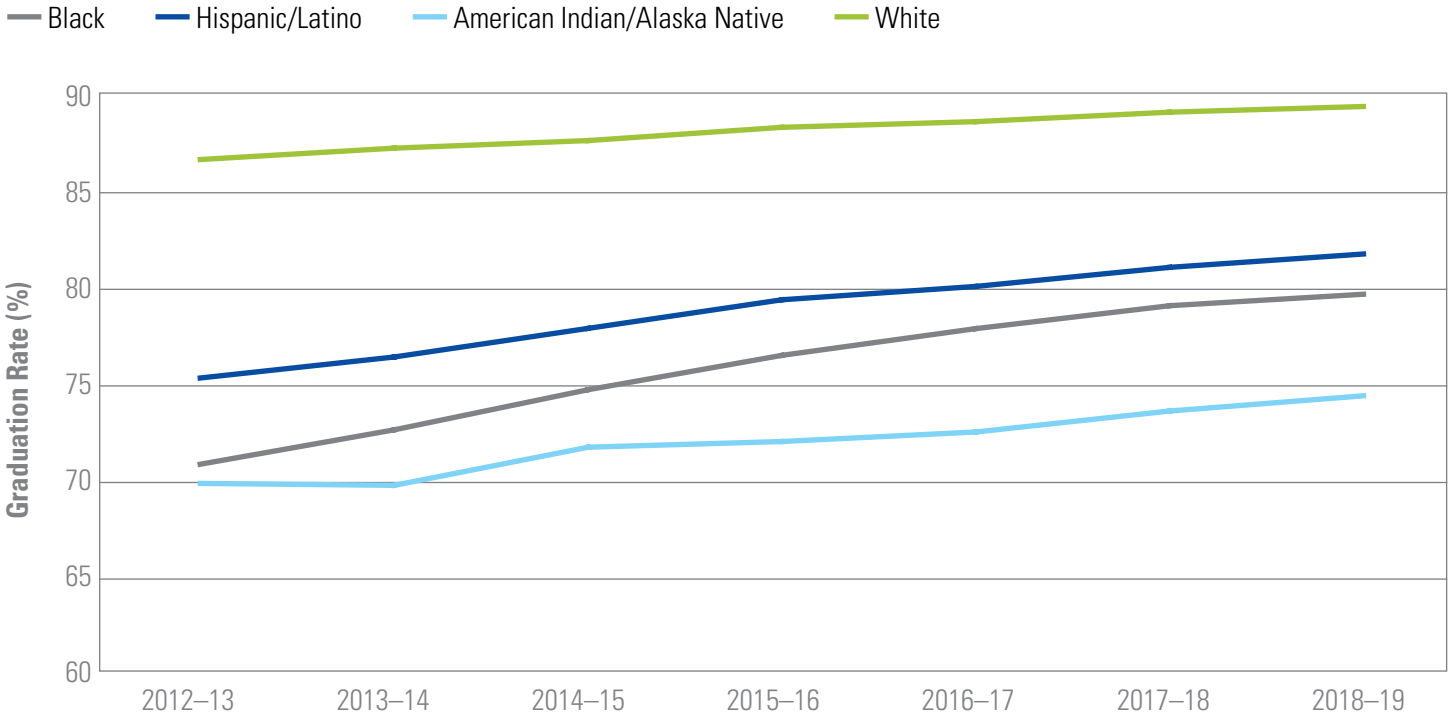
Most AI/AN students are educated at traditional public schools in the United States. Ninety-one percent of AI/AN attend local public schools and 8.5 percent attend a Bureau of Indian Education school (NCES, 2020). In the fall of 2017, 46,330 students were enrolled in BIE elementary and secondary schools.

Improving postsecondary outcomes for AI/AN students must begin with boosting high school graduation rates. In 2019, American Indian and Alaska Native students had a 74.3 percent Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR). This is significantly below the national average of 85.8 percent and an increase of just 2.7 percentage points over the past five years.

AI/AN students comprised 1 percent of the graduating cohort in 2019 and are more highly represented in Alaska, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. These six states educated 79.6 percent of the total AI/AN cohort in 2019, yet all but one had a high school graduation rate below the national average for Native students. This concentration represents a challenge, but also an opportunity, for policymakers to target supports for AI/AN students struggling to graduate high school.

Looking beyond the 2019 cohort, 18- to 24-year-old American Indian and Alaska

ADJUSTED COHORT GRADUATION RATE (ACGR) FOR BLACK, HISPANIC, AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE, AND WHITE STUDENTS FROM 2012–13 TO 2018–19



Natives also have high school completion rates lower than most of their peers. Ninety-one percent of 18- to 24-year-old AI/AN students had completed high school by 2018, less than all other subgroups except for Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds (89.2 percent). This results in less than one in four (23.6 percent) AI/AN 18- to 24-year-olds being enrolled in college.

Similarly, AI/AN 16- to 24-year-olds are more likely to be out of work and out of school than any other subgroup, despite recent progress. Over the past five years, the rate of youth disconnection for AI/AN students has declined from 26.3 percent to 23.4 percent. Still, this is more than double the national average of youth disconnection (11.2 percent), and significantly higher than AI/AN youth's Black (17.4 percent), Latinx (12.8 percent), white (9.2 percent), and Asian (6.2 percent) peers (Lewis, 2020).

State	Graduation Rate, American Indian and Alaska Native: 2018–19	Percent of Cohort, AI/AN, 2018–19	Percent of State's Non-Graduates, AI/AN, 2018-19	High School-Postsecondary Alignment
Alaska	68.0%	22.6%	36.9%	No
Oklahoma	84.8%	14.5%	14.6%	With Reservation
New Mexico	70.0%	10.8%	13.0%	No
Montana	67.0%	10.5%	25.9%	No
South Dakota	54.0%	11.3%	32.3%	Yes
North Dakota	72.0%	10.1%	24.1%	No

Of the six states with the largest cohorts of AI/AN students, only South Dakota's high school graduation requirements align with the state postsecondary system's admission standards, and only six states total across the nation do so. Oklahoma requires the same number of credits to graduate, but does not require the same course sequencing as the state's public higher education system. This erects additional barriers for the transition from high school to postsecondary for all students and can unnecessarily lead to added remediation.

Bureau of Indian Education

The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) in the U.S. Department of Education was established in 2006 to oversee education for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the U.S. Department of the Interior. The BIE currently oversees 183 schools across 23 states, totaling 48,000 students. Of these schools, 130 are tribally controlled and funded by BIE grants. Under ESSA, the BIE is required, like all state education agencies, to identify schools that are eligible for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI). This includes the lowest 5 percent of academically achieving schools and low-graduation-rate high schools, schools with a graduation rate of 67 percent or less with 100 or more students. In addition to the 183 schools, the BIE also oversees two federally operated postsecondary schools, Haskell Indian Nations University and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, and funds 33 tribally operated colleges and universities across the country, concentrated primarily in Arizona, New Mexico, and North and South Dakota.

In 2018, BIE schools had a graduation rate of 64 percent. This is a slight increase from the 62.9 percent rate in 2017.

BIE schools receive 80 percent of their funding from the U.S. Department of Education. Tribally-controlled schools are funded through two appropriations bills based on the average daily attendance of students.

In 2018, the Bureau of Indian Education announced a new strategic plan through 2023. Prior to this, the BIE did not have a common strategy or effective tool to addressing education barriers. Through fiscal year 2020, the Bureau of Indian Education plans to:

- Complete the reorganization of the Bureau of Indian Education to firmly establish it as a separate entity from BIA, to better focus it on providing the resources and customized technical assistance to support tribes in establishing and operating high-performing schools on their own; and
- Continue to expand its capacity to improve services to students by regulating the scope of organizational processes and setting priorities that will result in better data management and reporting (*2019/2020 Annual Performance*, 2019).

Since the passage of ESSA in 2015, the BIE is eligible for federal funding for education that was previously only available to states. This includes arts education and prevention and intervention programs. ESSA also requires states to consult local Tribes when developing Title 1 plans (ibid.).

Historically, accountability for BIE schools was under the purview of tribal education departments or tribal schools. Under ESSA, however, BIE is required to report schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement. In addition, recent reforms have pushed to establish clear reporting and accountability within the BIE by appointing a Chief Academic Officer and Chief Performance Officer.

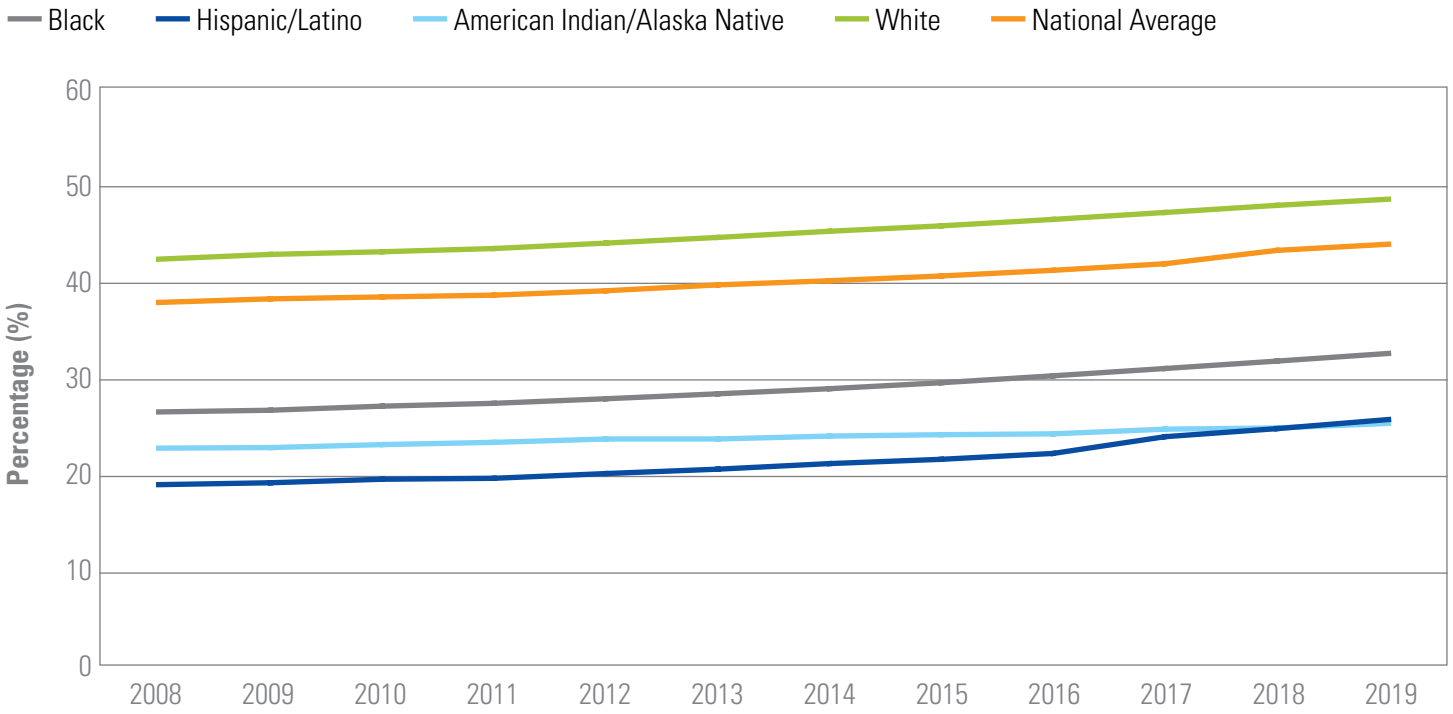
Transitions to Postsecondary

Some indicators point to college readiness declining for all students. For example, scores on the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks—the minimum ACT test scores required for students to have a reasonable chance of success in first-year credit-bearing college courses—have steadily dropped from a composite score of 20.8 in 2016 to 20.6 in 2020, out of a total of 36. AI/AN students have similarly seen their scores decline from 17.7 to 16.7. Just seven percent of AI/AN students met the ACT College Readiness Score on all four subjects, compared to 26 percent for all students (*Profile Report*, 2020). Similarly, American Indian and Alaska Native students were the least likely subgroup to meet both SAT college readiness benchmarks (*SAT Suite*, 2020).

While many students' test scores significantly impact the colleges available to them, more recent research points to high school course-taking and course-performance as stronger indicators of college performance (Balfanz et al., 2016). Unfortunately, AI/AN students tend to have far less access to rigorous courses than their peers. Data from the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection show that fewer than half of American Indian and Alaska Native students have access to the full range of math and science courses (*Data Snapshot*, 2014).

Furthermore, a 2013 report showed that AI/AN students had less access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses than any other group of students in the United States (Theokas & Saaris, 2013). Even when AI/AN students attend schools that offer AP courses, evidence suggests they are far less likely to enroll in these courses than their peers. This gap in AP course-taking is not the result of a lack of academic preparation. A report by the College Board indicated that more than seven in ten AI/AN students received PSAT scores that suggested they had the potential to succeed in AP Math and Science, but were still not enrolled in these classes in high school (*The 98th Report*, 2013).

PERCENT OF AMERICANS AGES 25–64 WITH AT LEAST AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE, 2008–2019



In addition, AI/AN students tend to have lower high school grade point averages (GPAs) than most of their peers. A longitudinal study by the U.S. Department of Education showed that of all subgroups, American Indian and Alaska Native students in the class of 2013 had the lowest GPAs, with an average GPA of 2.1 compared to the national average of 2.6.

Postsecondary Attainment

Immediate enrollment for 18- to 24-year-olds has been inconsistent over the past decade, reaching a high of 41.4 percent in 2010 and a low of 18.6 percent in 2016. Currently, the rate for 2019 sits at 25 percent (*Current Population Survey*, 2019). In 2017, college enrollment rates in 2- or 4-year institutions of American Indian and Alaska Native students was 20 percent, less than half the rate of their white peers (41 percent).

Overall, 24.6 percent of AI/AN ages 25-64 hold at least an associate degree, up from 22.5 percent in 2008. This is significantly less than the overall population in the U.S., which sits at 43.2 percent. The rate of increase for AI/AN associate degrees is also lower than the national average.

Over half (51.8 percent) of AI/AN students are enrolled in associate degree programs. This population also had the highest rates of enrollment for nondegree, certificate programs (13.8 percent) and the lowest enrollment rates for bachelor's programs. College enrollment for minorities increased from 1996 to 2016, except for American Indian and Alaska Natives, which dropped 11.5 percent from 30.3 to 18.8 percent.

Over half (51.4 percent) of American Indian and Alaska Native undergraduate students are over age 24. Conversely, ninety percent of all full-time undergraduate students at public 4-year institutions in the fall of 2017 were under the age of 25, illustrating the importance of strengthening the direct transition from high school to postsecondary if the nation is to improve its postsecondary attainment rates for AI/AN students.

Tribal Colleges and Universities

The first tribal college was established in 1968 by the Navajo Nation to provide access to a quality higher education. This action of establishing a tribally controlled higher education institution was the catalyst for a national movement. As of 2017, 37 Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) nationwide served over 15,000 students, with 13,000 of them identifying as American Indian or Alaska Natives.

Since TCUs were established by sovereign nations, they do not receive tax revenues from the states in which their reservations reside. As a result, they are entirely reliant on federal, tribal, and private financial support.

The most popular field of study at TCUs is liberal arts with roughly one in five students enrolling in it (Taylor et al., 2020). In contrast to other institutions of higher education, 44 percent of faculty at TCUs

are Native Americans. Still, persistence and retention rates at TCUs lag behind averages for all first-time undergraduate students. AIHEC reports a 61 percent persistence rate and 51 percent retention rate, compared to 76 percent and 67 percent, respectively, for all students (ibid.; *First-year Persistence*, 2020).

TCUs first emerged in an era of self-determination for American Indian education to sustain and grow American Indian cultures, a role they continue to play. TCUs play an important role in maintaining tribal cultures in addition to their role in educating AI/AN students. Tribal Colleges and Universities were created to support "Tribal Nation-building after Indigenous cultures endured generations of cultural and economic deterioration" (Stull et al., 2015). This deterioration was generally a product of the United States, specifically the government's approach to Native and Indigenous education.

A 2015 report by the Center for Minority Serving Institutions lays out other examples of how TCUs contribute to their communities and student success, including keeping college affordable for low-income students, fostering workforce development, hiring more diverse faculty than traditional higher education institutions, and producing research on Native issues from an AI/AN perspective.

The affordability of TCUs is a particular benefit for Native American students and families that disproportionately struggle with high rates of poverty. In 2017-18, the average net price of attending a TCU was $7,104, compared to $13,700 for the average first-time, full-time undergraduate student attending an in-state, 4-year public university (NCES, 2020).

TCU alumni are nearly twice as likely than their peers nationally to thrive in all elements of wellbeing and significantly more likely than graduates nationally to say their alma mater prepared them well for life outside of college (*Alumni*, 2019).

Barriers to Education

Heightened Socio-Economic Challenges and Trauma

American Indian and Alaska Native students face significant challenges beyond those of their peers. Twenty-nine percent of Native American children under 18 live in poverty, more than any other subgroup except for Black children in the United States (*Current Population Survey*, 2019).

In addition, AI/AN students disproportionately face harsh school punishment, including out of school suspensions. Nearly seven percent (6.7 percent) of AI/AN students receive an out-of-school suspension, compared to the national average of 5.3 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

While data on TCUs remains scant, a survey by the Hope Center illustrated a greater level of needs for AI/AN students in these schools as well. The results indicate that 62 percent of respondents were food insecure in the past month, 69 percent were housing insecure, and 30 percent were homeless in the previous year. These numbers are significantly higher than the national averages of 39 percent, 46 percent, and 17 percent, respectively.

In addition to the challenges associated with heightened poverty rates, AI/AN students also face greater levels of trauma. American Indian and Alaska Native students are more likely to have 2 or more adverse childhood experiences than any other subgroup of students, as 36.2 percent of parents report Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scores greater than two (*Adverse*, 2020).

Native communities also experience higher rates of suicide and drug abuse. Since 1999, the suicide rate in the United States has increased 33 percent overall. Over that same time period, the suicide rate for AI/AN women has increased by 139 percent, and 71 percent for men (Curtin & Hedegaard, 2019). The suicide rate for AI/AN populations is higher than any other subgroup in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In addition, American Indians and Alaska Natives aged 12 and older had the highest rate of substance abuse and dependence in a 2017 survey (Substance Abuse, 2018).

Invisibility and Identity

Native students are overwhelmingly educated by a public school system that fails to recognize and affirm their identity. A 2019 landscape analysis examined the history curricula of 26 states with federally recognized tribal nations that were promoting culturally responsive Native American curricula. The report found that while most states do include Native American education in their curriculum standards, less than half require it in public schools, and when it is taught it is only included in social studies lessons. Less than half of the states analyzed require that Native curricula teach about Tribal Nations in their state (*Becoming Visible*, 2019).

A 2015 study found that 87 percent of state history taught in schools does not mention Native American history after 1900. In addition, 27 states do not even mention Native Americans in their curricula (Shear et al., 2015). This has caused nearly three quarters (72 percent) of Americans to report rarely learning information about Native American history (*Becoming Visible*, 2019).

American Indian and Alaska Native students in public schools also rarely learn Native languages. The National Indian Education Study of 2015 showed that 47 percent of 4th-grade students and 52 percent of 8th-grade students "never" learned Native languages, compared to 6 and 4 percent, respectively, who did so often. Students at schools with higher proportions of Native students were more likely to learn about Native languages, while students who attended classes at BIE schools were by far the most likely to learn Native languages, with 90 percent of 4th graders and 96 percent of 8th graders at BIE schools learning a Native language "sometimes" or "often" (*The National Indian Education Study*, 2019).

The result, sadly, is a mass loss of Native languages. By one estimate, 65 Native languages have already gone extinct, with another 75 in danger of becoming so (Sparks, n.d.).

The typical Euro-centric education presented to students in America's public schools is just one example of the erasure Native American students feel in the U.S. education system. In addition, the romanticized history of the Native-colonist relationship creates misconceptions and stereotypes that AI/AN students are forced to confront.

Moreover, there are very few Native teachers or professors. NCES shows that less than one percent of all

Red Cloud Indian School Lakota Language Program

In an effort to revitalize the Lakota language and culture, Red Cloud Indian School launched the Lakota Language Project (LLP). The project was originally launched in 2007 to confront the fact that there are less than 6,000 fluent Lakota speakers left.

Since Lakota is historically a spoken language, Red Cloud Indian School had to develop its own curriculum. Now, Red Cloud teachers teach Lakota in all 13 grade levels across three schools. After completing the language curriculum, the school embarked on a second phase with the goals of developing Lakota-based literature for Red Cloud students, providing professional development opportunities for teachers, and increasing the use of the Lakota language.

The program has shown promising results for both Lakota cultural revitalization and student engagement. Red Cloud reports that 67 percent of students speak Lakota more at home as a result of the LLP curriculum, while 77 percent of parents and grandparents report their students have an increased awareness of Lakota traditions (Red Cloud Indian School, n.d.). In addition, an independent evaluation indicated that the LLP curriculum helped increase student engagement and foster stronger cultural identity for students (RMC Research Corporation, 2018).

postsecondary instructors are American Indian and Alaska Native. Conversely, American Indian Higher Education Consortium data show that 46 percent of all faculty at TCUs are American Indian and Alaska Native and 71 percent of TCU administrators are American Indian.

Higher education institutions must also work with Native American students to ensure they can practice cultural traditions. One study shows that AI/AN youth engagement with cultural-based practices increased ethnic identity for those in urban settings and suggested that these practices could be useful in improving mental and behavioral health for AI/AN youth (Schweigman et al., 2011).

Lack of Financial Support

Part of the reason Indigenous education is lacking in the United States is due to a lack of financial investment. *Becoming Visible* showed that only one-third of the surveyed states allocated funding for things such as staffing, development, curriculum, or grants for AI/AN students.

As mentioned previously, AI/AN students face higher poverty rates than any other population in the United States, presenting a barrier to college affordability. This leaves many AI/AN students with unmet financial aid. Among full-time, full-year undergraduate students in 2015–16, 87 percent of Native students received grants, but just 38 percent received loans (de Brey, 2019). This is less than all student subgroups except Asian students.

To counteract challenges of college affordability for Indigenous students, the American Indian College Fund was formed in 1989. Since their founding, the organization has awarded 143,281 scholarships, including investing $27.8 million to Native students in the last two years alone.

Geographic Isolation

Oftentimes, the proximity of a nearby postsecondary school is the deciding factor for a high school graduate. Over half of first-year students attending a public four-year college enroll within 50 miles from home. For public 2-year colleges, this distance is even less. Many communities, however, are categorized as "education deserts"—areas where there are zero colleges or universities nearby or where one community college is the only public broad-access (admission rate higher than 75 percent) postsecondary institution in the vicinity.

Attending a postsecondary institution close to home can help defray some of the costs of college or may come down to strong community ties. Both these factors are often stronger for Latinx and AI/AN students in particular. Troublingly, Native American and Hispanic adults are disproportionately likely to live in an education desert (Hillman & Weichman, 2016).

Digital Divide

FCC data indicates just 72.3 percent of Americans on Tribal land have access to broadband, compared to 98.5 percent in urban areas (Federal Communications Commission, 2020). Additionally, a 2017 NCES study estimated that 36 percent of Native American students nationwide lacked internet access compared to 18 percent of their peers, while a recent survey found that 40 percent of BIE schools lacked any type of internet (National Indian Education Association, 2020). This lack of connectivity severely impeded BIE schools as they attempted to make the shift to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By April of 2020, less than half of BIE schools had been able to offer digital learning of any type (44.7 percent), while less than one in three schools (31.3 percent) offered digital learning with equipment for students (*NIEA Surveys*, 2020).

The digital divide also feeds into a "homework gap" for students who lack access to broadband. In 2009, the FCC reported that 70 percent of teachers assign homework that required access to broadband. Students who are unable to access or complete homework are at a severe disadvantage and more likely to drop out of high school (Fairlie et al., 2010).

Policy & Practice Options

Diversify Educator Workforce

Less than one percent of all full-time faculty in degree-granting institutions identify as American Indian and Alaska Native. This creates a barrier for AI/ANs to feel welcome and culturally accepted.

Several policy options have emerged to diversify the educator workforce. One emerging area is Grow Your Own programs. Grow Your Own (GYO) programs focus on increasing pathways to teaching for untraditional candidates in their own communities—those who are highly invested and qualified, but do not have or cannot complete a four-year bachelor's degree. These programs offer a variety of support for potential teachers including scholarships, flexible class schedules, and mentoring. Successful GYOs work to reduce teacher shortages and turnover, misalignment between teachers and districts, and language, cultural, and racial barriers between teachers and students through increased diversity.

Currently, there is a wide array of ways GYO initiatives are administered, but most require a local partnership between a school district and higher education institution, such as a community college. GYOs should be expanded at the state level through competitive grant programs. Their success is evidenced by programs that have increased locally sourced teachers in California, Illinois, Minnesota, and Texas, among others (Muniz, 2020).

Other states have developed fellowships and residency programs to train teachers. New Mexico awarded grants to four teacher prep programs to establish residency models aimed at addressing diversity and quality, with a particular focus on the needs of districts with large numbers of English Learners and Native students. Meanwhile, the American Indian College Fund offers three fellowships for TCU faculty members, with the agreement that they continue teaching at TCUs for at least two additional years (or one in the case of a pre-dissertation fellowship). These fellowships have helped nearly 148 TCU faculty further their advanced degree, 36 complete their terminal degrees, and 53 earn their advanced degree.

Develop Culturally Affirming Practices, with Accountability

Culturally responsive education (CRE) and pedagogy is a growing technique with emerging evidence pointing to its effectiveness. CRE includes both content and pedagogical approaches by connecting students' cultural assets and references to academic content and skills; utilizing curricula that encourages student reflection on their lives and society; and supporting student cultural competencies by facilitating learning about their and other cultures. CRE reflects the principles emerging from the science of learning and development that demonstrate effective practices. In addition, a study of a culturally relevant course taught in public schools increased student attendance and grade point average (Dee & Penner, 2016).

To ensure cultural relevance and responsiveness, educators should co-develop curriculums with Native American experts and tribal members. This process should include honoring Native Americans, creating internship and service-learning opportunities that connect hands-on learning with Native and Indigenous communities and needs, and support Native American studies programs.

Institutions must also work to train all faculty and staff to be culturally competent by seeking support from professional organizations, Tribal Nation members, and providing diversity training that includes knowledge-building of Native American cultures and history. CRE for AI/AN students should also include tribal dual language programs.

There are several helpful guides and examples for navigating the process of developing culturally relevant instruction and curriculums. In New Mexico, the Indigenous Wisdom curriculum provides teachers with educational plans for K-12 students based on the Pueblo nations. In addition, the Navajo Nation of Diné Education has a tribal consultation guide to help co-development of curricula.

Create Welcoming Campus Cultures

While developing culturally relevant education practices, diversifying the educator workforce, and training culturally competent staff will go a long way in creating welcoming and inclusive settings for AI/AN students, more must be done to create safe, positive learning environments.

All institutions should evaluate the narrative of Indigenous peoples in the institution's history and participate in indigenous land acknowledgments. Institutions should also provide Native student support centers that maintain a dedicated space for AI/AN students to gather. Moreover, to ensure strong,

mutually productive relationships with Native Nations that enhance learning environments, institutions can hire a tribal liaison and establish Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with Native Nations. For example, within the University of Utah's Office of Engagement is an Education Coordinator and Educational Liaison to the Ute Indian Tribe, whose role is to explore ways to enhance the educational opportunities of the tribe.

Strengthen the High School to Postsecondary Pipeline

Earning college credit while still in high school helps reduce the cost of college. For AI/AN students who face disproportionately high poverty rates, this can significantly boost the chances of college attainment. Research shows that students who participate in dual enrollment programs, particularly those who are low-income, are significantly more likely to graduate from college (Blankenberger et al., 2017; An, 2013).

Yet, due to the laws governing how programs are funded, American Indian students face additional barriers to participate. Typically, state rules or policies governing eligibility for dual credit and dual enrollment programs extend to students in public schools and, occasionally, those in private schools. This often leaves students enrolled in BIE schools in the dark as to their eligibility or who is responsible to pay for dual enrollment programs. Similarly, not all states with TCUs explicitly authorize these colleges to participate. TCUs also face added financial challenges to participating, as state programs that reimburse public postsecondary institutions for dedicated full-time employees of dual enrollment programs typically would not include TCUs.

To remove these obstacles for AI/AN student participation in dual enrollment and dual credit programs, states should explicitly authorize BIE schools and TCUs to participate, as well as enact policies to make TCUs eligible for state financial

Culturally Responsive Education in Denver Public Schools

Denver Public Schools is working towards a culturally responsive education for American Indian and Alaska Native students. Native American Culture and Education (NACE) provides more than 1,000 AI/AN students with additional support services to reduce disparities between their home and school cultures. NACE promotes an equitable education for AI/AN students through social and emotional support, youth leadership development, parent engagement, and experiential learning activities (*Native American*, 2021).

Two main focuses of NACE are 'Native Student and Family Support' and 'Culturally Responsive Teaching for Native Students.' Family support is achieved through cultural events, such as The Denver March Pow*Wow and community partnerships that keep families and culture part of student conversations. Various schools in the district offer the course, Lakota Language and Culture (levels 1 through 4). For more culturally responsive teaching, NACE also offers a Fourth Grade Ute [People] Guide.

Recognizing the trauma many AI/AN students face, NACE also includes the Helping Our People Endure (H.O.P.E.) program. H.O.P.E. provides intervention and prevention strategies for students on "suicide and substance misuse in Indian Country." This program works to address the silent struggles of these communities in mental health and substance abuse. H.O.P.E trains administrators, educators, and the community to promote inclusion, increases leadership opportunities, and improves the health and wellness of AI/AN youth.

Denver Public Schools has additionally addressed 8th grade Social Studies curricula in recent years, which "eliminat[ed] the Native American perspective." The old curriculum emphasized white settlers' challenges in the 1800s, despite the simultaneous atrocities committed against millions of American Indians. The changes recognize the struggles of American Indians and were championed by school educators who identify as American Indian (Chalkbeat, 2019).

This representation in Denver's school curriculum is a crucial component to promoting equity and inclusion in schools, lowering the AI/AN high school drop-out rate, and boosting postsecondary attainment. The culturally responsive efforts of Denver Public Schools for American Indian and Alaska Native students should serve as a model for other districts.

support. States can follow the lead of New Mexico, where state legislation requires that BIE high schools adhere to the same eligibility requirements as public schools, explicitly allows TCUs to serve as postsecondary partners in dual enrollment programs, and established a dual credit program fund for tribal colleges within the state treasury.

States should also ensure high school graduation requirements are aligned with the admission requirements of their flagship public university system. Currently, there is full alignment between high school graduation requirements and postsecondary admission requirements in just six states.

Better Use Data to Understand Native American Students and Their Needs

Data on AI/AN students in both K-12 and postsecondary education remains scarce. Much more information is needed to fully understand Native students' education experiences. In addition, experts interviewed for this report indicated that much of the data that is currently collected, especially by the U.S. Department of Education, is irrelevant and not useful for Native populations. To address this, the U.S. Department of Education should partner with Native nations and organizations to determine what data should be collected and the best way to do so. More efforts should be undertaken to disaggregate data on Indigenous populations whenever possible.

One way to better understand the needs of AI/AN students in high school and postsecondary education would be to develop and administer needs assessments. To help states and local education agencies do this, the Institute of Education Sciences developed a Guide to Conducting a Needs Assessment for American Indian Students. The guide provides surveys developed in collaboration with communities that serve American Indian and Alaska Native students to target needs and monitor improvement efforts. North Dakota has developed their own annual needs assessment and companion action to survey and target the needs of their Native and Indigenous students.

Increase Funding for Tribal Colleges and Universities

Since tribal colleges and universities were chartered by sovereign tribal nations, states are not obligated to provide funding to TCUs. As such, few states provide any funding to TCUs despite the fact that they offer high-quality, low-cost postsecondary opportunities to Native and non-Native learners alike, and often to those who have few alternative options. In addition, federal funding through the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act of 1978 has not kept pace with the growth of enrollment at TCUs. This has left many TCUs underfunded.

Some states currently provide funding, but often for specific purposes including capital costs, per pupil funding for non-Native students at TCUs, or particular postsecondary degrees (e.g. North Dakota provides grants to TCUs for workforce training and entrepreneurial assistance, and related programs of study). States should develop policies to provide equitable funding streams to TCUs, while the federal government should ensure it is allocating funding that is commensurate with the increase in attendance at these institutions.

Conclusion

For far too long, the United States has failed the Nation's First Students and Indigenous populations. These students are often the most isolated, both socially and geographically, and disproportionately face challenges in simply accessing a college education due to heightened levels of poverty and community need.

It is no surprise then that the educational outcomes of Indigenous populations, specifically American Indian and Alaska Natives, has lagged behind their peers. This amounts to a breach of contract by the federal government that has repeatedly failed to meet its legal responsibility to provide a quality education to AI/AN students.

Now is the time to build productive partnerships between Tribal Nations, the U.S. Department of Education, and institutions of higher education to co-develop stronger K-16 pathways that are culturally reaffirming and revitalizing to AI/AN populations, while boosting educational outcomes.

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