



**REGION 16**  
Alaska  
Oregon  
Washington

# **National Native Tuition Waiver Study**

## A REPORT TO THE REGION 16 COMPREHENSIVE CENTER

**Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn and Natalie Rose Youngbull**  
July 2023

## REGION 16 COMPREHENSIVE CENTER

Region 16 Comprehensive Center is one of 19 Regional Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Our center was created in 2019 to help state education agencies in Alaska, Oregon, and Washington implement their plans for the Every Student Succeeds Act. As a consortium of 29 educational service districts, we engage state, regional, Tribal, school, and community partners to create the conditions for students, educators, and communities to learn and thrive.

### Acknowledgments

This report is the result of research by scholars Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn and Natalie Rose Youngbull. This report was developed in support of the Office of Native Education at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The contents of this report were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government. This work has been created in partnership with the Region 16 Comprehensive Center.

### Contact

Region 16 Comprehensive Center 210 Ferry Way  
Juneau, AK 99801

[r16cc.org](http://r16cc.org)

[r16cc@serrc.org](mailto:r16cc@serrc.org)

### Suggested citation

Minthorn, R. Z. & Youngbull, N. R. (2023). *National Native tuition study: A report to the Region 16 Comprehensive Center*. Region 16 Comprehensive Center.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research builds a narrative of a nationwide study on tuition waiver and tuition assistance programs. We administered a survey to long-standing and newly implemented tuition waiver programs within universities that identified limitations and opportunities.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the varied approaches to administering tuition waivers for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. This study will inform how tuition waiver initiatives impact AI/AN student success at mainstream institutions of higher education.

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How are active tuition waivers for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students administered?
  - a. What are the criteria of tuition waivers?
2. How have active tuition waivers impacted AI/AN student enrollment and success?

We received survey responses from 11 institutions across the United States, representing multiple institutions of higher education (IHE) and state agency representatives. Survey respondents represent diverse backgrounds across types of departments and agencies, institutional roles, and approaches to implementation. This demonstrates the diverse representation of areas that work in connection to and support the Native tuition waivers at these institutions.

The findings for this study are presented in seven areas:

- How they were legislatively mandated,
- Funding mechanisms used,
- Funding covered,
- Length of implementation,
- Who it serves,
- Impact on enrollment, and
- Impact on retention and graduation.

Recommendations resulting from this study are inclusive of the professionals' voices who responded to the survey. They shared the policies and impacts on Native student access to higher education. Our recommendations include implementing a statewide Native tuition waiver, including providing comprehensive support to Native students and being inclusive of all Native students.

This study affirms tuition waivers are impactful for AI/AN students. Tuition waivers are specific to the institution and both internal and external factors, such as federal or state legislation or existing relationships with Tribal nations, including local or regional proximity to the institution. This research provides context and support for Washington State to consider implementing a statewide tuition waiver to broaden Native student access to higher education.

## INTRODUCTION

This study highlights the varied approaches to administering tuition waivers for Native American students. This is intended to build a narrative about tuition waiver and tuition assistance programs nationwide. This study will inform how tuition waiver initiatives impact Native American<sup>1</sup> student success at mainstream institutions of higher education. This report will provide an overview of the study's findings and recommendations for future policy, practice, and research based on survey responses received from long-standing and newly implemented tuition waiver and tuition assistance programs within universities and colleges. We have also identified limitations and opportunities in seven areas:

- Legislatively mandated,
- Funding mechanisms used,
- Funding covered,
- Length of implementation,
- Who it serves,
- Impact on enrollment, and
- Impact on retention and graduation.

## BACKGROUND

### General Native Tuition Waiver Conversations

In recent years, there has been a surge of universities and colleges creating pathways of access for Native American students through the enactment of [Native American tuition waiver programs](#). This includes providing gap funding for

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<sup>1</sup> This report uses the terms American Indian, Native American, Alaska Native, AI/AN, or First Nations interchangeably and we acknowledge that preferences vary for the terms used.

students who do not have full funding to enroll in a specific institution, in-state tuition waivers, and support for tuition only. Tuition waivers also vary by residency status, such as providing funding only to in-state students or providing out-of-state students in-state tuition rates. Some institutions have been in the process of providing tuition waivers for 112 years, while others just started providing tuition waivers in the 2022-23 school year. The recent conversation for tuition waivers has come at a time when Native Americans are receiving more visibility due to the current acknowledgment of people who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The term BIPOC has gained national attention, especially following the social uprising due to the murder of [George Floyd](#) in 2020 and many other Black relatives in public. This has led to more advocacy for other marginalized communities, including Native American communities.

The consciousness within this time also includes the election of Native American legislator Deb Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna), who served in New Mexico's 1st Congressional district from 2019-21 and is now serving as the Secretary of the Interior. Sharice Davids (Ho-Chunk) is another Native American legislator who has served as the U.S. representative from Kansas's 3rd congressional district since 2019. The election these two Native women- and the later appointment of Secretary Haaland- in governing positions has not only empowered Native people to see themselves in positions of power that can provide a pathway to more visibility and systemic change, it also increases visibility of Native American community issues and needs. This helps provide pathways for supporting Native American students in higher education.

## Washington State Context

In Washington State, the Legislature passed the law for [Resident Tuition Rates- American Indian Students](#) (RCW 28B.15.0131) in 1994 and provides in-state tuition to Native American students who meet the following criteria:

1. Students must have lived in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, or Washington for one year immediately prior to enrolling in college.
2. Students must be members of federally recognized Tribes whose traditional Tribal boundaries included portions of the state of Washington, or whose tribe was granted reserved lands within the state of Washington.

In addition to providing in-state tuition under this law, colleges and universities may administer additional scholarships. Washington State University (WSU)

sprovides a [Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\) Tribal Scholarship](#) to Native American students who are members of a Tribe who have signed the MOU with WSU. This scholarship is for incoming students and at the award amount of up to \$4,000 dollars per academic year. WSU also offers the [Plateau Scholarship](#) to Native American students who are from the designated Tribes and is renewable each year with varying amounts awarded.

The University of Washington also acknowledges and provides in-state tuition through the Resident Tuition Rates–American Indian Students law. Though, there are no additional scholarships provided to Coastal or Plateau Tribes via a memorandum of agreement.

In September 2022, the Affiliated Tribes of the Northwest Indians (ATNI) passed [Resolution #2002-32](#) at their annual convention. This resolution specifically advocates for “Support for Washington State funding to waive the tuition, meals, room/board and all associated fees for American Indian/Alaska Native students of the Northwest Region to attend a university or post-secondary institution in Washington State.” This advocacy, along with the state and university college presidents’ conversations about a Native American tuition waiver, led to the creation of House Bill 1399. This bill was first introduced in January 2023, followed by a substitute [House Bill 1399](#).

Under this substitute bill, a New Section 3 added the following language, “For eligible students attending an undergraduate degree program, [the office of student financial assistance within the student achievement council] shall prioritize a funding level equivalent to in-state tuition and fee rates for eligible students, but that students who have in-state tuition and fees covered by other gift aid receive an award to help cover the cost of attendance expenses, such as room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and other living expenses.” This would be a comprehensive approach that does not exist in many of the current offerings of a statewide Native tuition waiver that also considers supporting students with covering room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and living expenses. Although this bill did not pass and will not be implemented during this session, there is hope that it can be revived for the 2024 session.

Some of the concerns shared by those present at the testimony were legislators with constituents whose Tribes are not federally recognized, a requirement outlined in another section of the bill, and that there may be those who are not Native American concerned with others not receiving this support. This feedback affirms the need for more education and awareness of Tribal sovereignty and recognition of Indigenous people and their rights to education. Education is guaranteed in regard

to sovereignty and treaty rights for federally recognized Tribes per signed treaties that include this recognition (and any Tribe, whether federally recognized or not). Education is a right that should be honored for all Tribal communities that have experienced colonization through boarding schools, loss of language, or cultural loss.

## GENEALOGICAL CONNECTIONS

There are three areas of genealogical connections<sup>2</sup> we highlighted for this research study that have direct connections to Native tuition waivers and their importance and impact. The first area is Indigenous students in higher education, the next is Indigenous higher education policy, and lastly Native financial aid<sup>3</sup>. Understanding the interconnections and needs are significant and important to understand the impacts on Native students and Tribal communities.

### Indigenous Students in Higher Education

Understanding the overall context of how American Indian and Alaskan Native students navigate higher education, along with the enrollment and completion factors, is essential for foundational knowledge and connections (Brayboy, et. al, 2012). This includes understanding the experiences, challenges, and achievements of American Indian students in higher education (Brayboy, et. al, 2015). It's important to understand the varied context of Indigenous higher education and the complexity of identities and roles that impact Native student retention and persistence (Fox Tippeconnic et. al, 2005; Minthorn and Shotton, 2015). Shotton et. al (2013) expanded our knowledge of understanding Native students in higher

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<sup>2</sup> We are Indigenizing the term usually used for literature review to use the term genealogical connections, which references honoring the Indigenous scholarship and scholarship in general that has provided background and context to Native tuition waivers.

<sup>3</sup> Native financial aid is a phrase that has been coined to reference funding mechanisms for Native students in higher education.



education. They did this through sharing about Native student affairs praxis and highlighting how Indigenizing access through Indigenous-centered program development is a needed approach for us to broaden our higher education efforts (Shotton et. al, 2013; Waterman, et. al, 2018).

## Indigenous Higher Education Policy

There is an important connection to understanding Native students in higher education in how they are impacted by higher education policy. Native students are also political beings and nation builders through their citizenship to their Tribal nations. This understanding is also connected to how we advocate on all levels for their educational journeys and experiences (Deloria, et. al, 2018). Everyone can advocate for critiquing federal data sets that share how Native students are navigating higher education (Lopez and Marley, 2018). Finally, Reyes and Shotton (2018) conceptualize and share how bringing visibility to Native students' lived realities through their report on how Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students navigate higher education is an essential way to incorporate policy advocacy from the campus to the national level.

## Native Financial Aid

There is limited scholarship and research on Native financial aid. Nelson and Frye (2016) shared about the important progress Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) have made and described inequities in funding that limit their ability to impact the Tribal communities they are chartered to serve. Whereas Cooper (2015) discussed the impact of Native Tuition waivers on Native student retention in an article in *Diverse Issues*, noting the impact and complexities of tuition waivers in Massachusetts, Maine, and Michigan respectively.

In general, there is limited scholarship on Native American tuition waivers, and specifically when you tie this to Tribal sovereignty and Nation building. We sought to build these connections through the interweaving of sharing an overview of Indigenous students in higher education, Indigenous higher education policy, and Native financial aid. We hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Native tuition waiver scholarship through this initial understanding of policy, implementation, funding, and impact on retention and graduation.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical frameworks we are using for this study are Tribal Critical Race Theory (2006) and Native Nation Building (2001). These two theories and approaches through which we interpret our research findings center sovereignty

and the assertion of it from an individual lens and a Tribal community perspective. These are essential as we consider how the Native tuition waivers impact Native student access to higher education. This also contributes to understanding the nuances of the political realities that these higher education institutions are navigating and how this systemically impacts students' educational journeys.

Tribal Critical Race Theory provides an overview and articulation of why Tribal sovereignty asserts Indigenous people in a unique political status, and how Indigenous knowledge systems impact conversations around Critical Race Theory, as there is a conception of race but not tribal sovereignty (Brayboy, 2006). We focus on the third, fourth, and fifth tenets for this study:

3. "Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities,"
4. "Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification", and
5. "The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens." (Brayboy, 2006, p. 429)

[Native Nation Building](#) is a concept that encompasses the understanding that Tribes have the capacity and ability to build their communities. This can be done collectively, and individuals who are citizens of their Tribes can be nation-builders as well. Honoring Native Nation Building as a theoretical framework situates the notion that access to higher education for Tribes and Tribal citizens is a part of building of capacity and honoring sovereignty, including the treaties that were signed (forcibly and falsely promised). Education is a treaty and sovereign right, whether or not a Tribe has signed a treaty; each Tribal community has not been untouched by colonization and occupation. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the unique status that Native students have and the Tribal communities they represent in their higher education journeys. This alone situates and provides justification for the enactment of Native tuition waivers.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The method for this paper and research is an open-ended survey. This study began in early January 2023 and concluded in May 2023. The survey was co-designed by the authors and was developed to provide insights for the Region 16 Comprehensive Center, whose hope is to provide more in depth understanding about the landscape of higher education around Native tuition waivers. We administered the survey to 14 institutions that have active Native tuition waivers, their time implementing

Native tuition waivers ranging from one semester to over 20 years. We received responses from offices across the institutions, including financial aid, enrollment, Native American student support services, and diversity and equity offices. After receiving all responses, we employed a manual coding method that included cross-checking between two researchers and coding open-ended responses. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How are active tuition waivers for Native American students administered?
  - a. What are the criteria of tuition waivers?
2. How have active tuition waivers impacted Native American student enrollment and success?

## Data Collection

We began our data collection process with cursory research of the states and institutions that provide Native tuition waivers. This included researching currently existing Native tuition waivers, as well as mapping out genealogical connections of what literature connected to the topic of this study. We began generating a list of institutions and states that offered the Native tuition waiver, specifically on websites to also look at American Indian support services, including Native American studies and financial aid departments. This initial list continued to grow as we found media stories using “Native tuition waiver” as a keyword term. This also helped us identify more states and institutions as we continued our study process.

After creating our survey questionnaire through Google Forms and receiving IRB approval from the University of Washington (that our research was exempt), we sent the survey link to the list of institutions. We sent an email invitation and reminders to prospective survey participants on a biweekly basis. After a few months, we began to send reminders individually to participants and asked them to respond by a deadline. We were able to find four more states and universities that we did not find earlier and were able to receive feedback from a few more participants. Once we reached a representative number of institutions and states that participated in the survey, we began our survey analysis and findings overview.

## Participants/Universities

The 12 survey respondents represented diverse backgrounds and representations across areas as well as types of institutions. We received responses from 11 institutions across nine states that represented various institution types, including

[research](#), land grant, private, and two that currently hold Native Serving Non-Tribal Institution (NASNTI) status. The survey respondents' roles varied from directors and coordinators of Native American student centers or support centers to those who are employed through financial aid and enrollment management. This demonstrates the diverse representation of areas that work in connection to and support the Native tuition waivers at these institutions.

Below is a list of the participating institutions. The list includes the institutions' full names and the acronyms that are used throughout the findings section.

- Fort Lewis College (FLC)
- Portland State University (PSU)
- Metropolitan State University - Denver (MSU - Denver)
- Michigan State University (MSU)
- Northern Arizona University (NAU)
- University of Arizona (U of Arizona)
- University of California, Berkeley (UC-Berkeley (UC system))
- University of Maine (U of Maine)
- University of Minnesota - Morris (UMN - Morris)
- University of Nevada - Reno (UNR)
- University of Oregon (U of Oregon)
- University of Utah (U of Utah)

We acknowledge our direct connections to some of the respondents through our scholarship and work in Indigenous higher education.

## FINDINGS

The findings for this study are presented in seven sections: legislatively mandated, funding mechanism, funding covered, length of implementation, who does it serve, impact on enrollment, and impact on retention and graduation. How tuition waiver

programs were implemented is described in the legislatively mandated section. The funding mechanism section describes how tuition waiver programs are funded. The funding covered section explains what type of funding the tuition waiver programs provide. The length of implementation section details when each tuition waiver program was established. Student criteria is discussed in the who does it serve section. Institutional trends are illustrated in the impact of enrollment and in the impact of retention and graduation sections.

## Legislatively Mandated

Native American tuition waivers implemented through state legislation exist for Colorado, Nevada, Michigan, Minnesota, and Oregon. The legislation for both Colorado and Minnesota are specific to one in-state institution – FLC in Colorado and UMN–Morris in Minnesota. State legislation does not exist for Arizona, California, Maine, and Utah. All 12 survey respondents reported that their Native tuition waiver is implemented at the college and university level. Respondents from institutions located in Nevada, Oregon, Michigan, Colorado, and Maine indicated that tuition waivers were implemented across public state institutions, though not all tuition waivers in these states are mandated through state legislation.

**Table 1**

*State Legislation of Native Tuition Waivers*

STATES WITH LEGISLATION	STATES WITHOUT LEGISLATION
Colorado (FLC only)	Arizona
Michigan	California
Minnesota (UMN–Morris only)	Maine
Nevada	Utah
Oregon	

## Funding Mechanism

State funding covers tuition waivers for FLC, MSU, PSU, UMN–Morris, U of Maine, and the U of Oregon. Tuition waivers for the U of Maine are covered by the Board of Trustees, and internal resources fund tuition waivers for the U of Oregon.

A few institutions receive funding from different sources for their tuition waivers. A reallocation of financial aid covers the tuition waivers at the U of Arizona; the funding source was not reported. NAU expanded an institutional initiative to include Native and Indigenous students in their tuition waiver program. Private

donors fund the tuition waivers at the U of Utah. A combination of federal, state, and institutional grants fund tuition waivers at MSU–Denver, though there is no permanent funding in place at this time. UNR relied on institutional funding to cover tuition waivers for the 2022–23 academic year, as it is currently not funded by the state. The Nevada Assembly of Women requested funding from the state, and Assembly Bill 150 passed in June 2023 to secure state funding (A.B. 150, 2023). Several institutions (U of Arizona, UNR, and U of Utah) utilize a “last dollar grant” approach, meaning that their tuition waivers cover the tuition and mandatory fees not covered by other financial aid. In other words, all financial aid is accounted for before the tuition waiver funding is applied.

**Table 2**  
*Types of Funding for Native Tuition Waivers*

STATE FUNDING	INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING	PRIVATE DONORSHIP	“LAST DOLLAR GRANT”
FLC	NAU	U of Utah	MSU–Denver
MSU	U of Arizona		U of Arizona*
PSU	UC System		U of Utah*
U of Maine	UNR		
UMN–Morris			
U of Oregon			

### Funding Covered

The Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) classifies “tuition” for out-of state students, granting in-state tuition for out-of-state students, and “fees” for in-state students, covering most “fees” for in-state students except for insurance for graduate students. The waiver does not cover books, housing, or dining. UNR covered \$330,000 for 72 students in the 2022–23 academic year. In total, 140 students across the NSHE utilized the waiver for the 2022–23 academic year.

FLC, MSU, NAU, the U of Arizona, and UMN–Morris cover tuition only. In Michigan, the state reimburses the institutions of higher education for the number of students who receive the waiver through the Michigan Indian Tuition Waiver (MITW). The Native American Tuition Program (NATP) at PSU grants in-state resident rate for out-of-state students but does not cover full tuition.

For the U of Utah, the Native Student Scholarship covers the students’ tuition and mandatory fees not covered by other scholarships, in other words, “last dollar grant.” Similarly, the Arizona Native Scholars (ANS) grant is a gap grant that covers the portion of tuition not covered by other financial aid. MSU–Denver utilizes a “last dollar grant” approach to cover Native and Indigenous students’ tuition and mandatory fees.

The U of Maine and the U of Oregon provide more funding toward tuition, fees, and room and board. The U of Maine waiver covers tuition and fees, and a needs–based grant for room and board is available. The U of Oregon has a tiered system with three specific funding structures. First, students who are Tribal citizens of the nine federally recognized Tribes in Oregon are eligible for in–state tuition, whether they are Oregon or out–of–state residents. They may be eligible for the Oregon Tribal Student Grant, based on an application and criteria, which will cover the entire cost of attendance; this includes total estimated expenses for the year, such as tuition, room and board, books, supplies, transportation, loan fees, and other miscellaneous expenses. Second, students who are tribal citizens of federally recognized Tribes with traditional ties to Oregon are eligible for in–state tuition and the Oregon Opportunity Grant, a need–based grant based on students’ Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or Oregon Student Aid Application (ORSAA). Third, students who are tribal citizens of any federally recognized Tribal nation are eligible for the Native American Tuition Program, which provides a discount that results in in–state tuition.

**Table 3**  
*Funding Covered for Native Tuition Waivers*

FUNDING COVERED	INSTITUTIONS	NOTES
Tuition Only	FLC MSU NAU PSU UMN–Morris UNR U of Arizona	UNR covers tuition for out–of–state students and tuition and fees for in–state, PSU’s NATP provides in–state tuition to out–of–state students.
Tuition and Mandatory Fees	MSU–Denver UC System	MSU–Denver and U of Utah utilize “last dollar grant” approach; U of



	U of Utah	Utah has private donorship and a Native Student Scholarship.
Tuition, Mandatory Fees, and More	U of Maine U of Oregon	U of Maine awards a needs-based grant for room and board, and U of Oregon utilizes a 3-tiered funding system that ranges from full cost of attendance to in-state tuition.

### Length of Implementation

There are a few institutions with well-established Native tuition waivers. The oldest state legislation for Native tuition waivers was established in 1911 for FLC. Then in 1960, the UMN-Morris implemented their tuition waiver program. Later in 1976, Michigan passed Public Act 174, also known as the Michigan Indian Tuition Waiver Act.

Several institutions have implemented tuition waiver programs within the last 10 years. In 2015, the University of Maine system established a Native American Waiver and Education Program. Oregon passed Senate Bill 312 in 2019, which prompted the U of Oregon to implement a tuition waiver program in 2020. PSU established its Native American Tuition Program (NATP) in 2022. UNR began providing tuition waivers in fall 2021.

Survey respondents from four institutions reported newly implemented tuition waiver programs within the last year. The U of Arizona instituted its tuition waiver program in Fall 2022. Similarly, MSU-Denver instituted the Indigenous and Native People’s Grant in 2022. The University of Utah launched its Native Student Scholarship in spring 2023. NAU will begin offering tuition waivers in fall 2023.

### Who Does It Serve?

The eligibility criteria for tuition waivers vary across student classification (undergraduate only *or* undergraduate, graduate, and professional) and Tribal status (Tribal nations within the state *or* all federally or state-recognized Tribal nations). The reporting institutions are nearly evenly split on student classification. Five institutions offer tuition waivers for undergraduate students only: MSU-Denver, NAU, UMN-Morris, U of Arizona, and U of Utah, while the remaining seven institutions—FLC, MSU, PSU, UC-Berkeley (UC system), U of Maine, UNR, and U of Oregon—provide tuition waivers for undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. Regarding Tribal status, there are more institutions that offer tuition waivers to all Tribal nations (FLC, PSU, MSU, MSU-Denver, U of Maine, UMN-



Morris, and U of Oregon) than those institutions that only include Tribal nations within the state (AU, U of Arizona, UNR, and U of Utah).

Representatives also indicated residency status as another important criterion of tuition waivers (i.e., in-state or out-of-state). Some institutions provide tuition waivers to students who are either enrolled in or descended from a Tribal nation within or bordering the state, but students must have residency within the state. Other institutions provide tuition waivers to students who are enrolled or descended from a federally recognized Tribal nation and do not have to prove residency within the state.

**Table 4**

*Institutions that provide Native Tuition Waivers to students enrolled in any federally recognized Tribe*

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS ONLY	UNDERGRADUATE, GRADUATE, AND PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS
UMN-Morris	FLC
MSU-Denver	MSU
	PSU
	U of Maine
	U of Oregon

**Table 5**

*Institutions that provide Native Tuition Waivers to students enrolled in in-state Tribes only*

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS ONLY	UNDERGRADUATE, GRADUATE, AND PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS
NAU	UC-Berkeley (UC system)
U of Arizona	UNR
U of Utah	

## Impact of Enrollment

We polled survey respondents on the impact of the Native tuition waiver on enrollment of Native and Indigenous students. Though these survey respondents are knowledgeable of the impact, their responses are purely anecdotal. Survey respondents from the following institutions indicated that the tuition waivers increased the enrollment of Native and Indigenous students on their campuses: FLC, MSU-Denver, UMN-Morris, U of Arizona, U of Maine, UNR, and U of Oregon. Respondents from PSU and the U of Utah were unsure of the impact, and representatives from NAU and UC-Berkeley (UC system) indicated that it was too early to determine the tuition waivers' impact on enrollment. MSU was the only institution that indicated that the tuition waiver had no impact on the enrollment of Native and Indigenous students.

**Table 6**

*Reported Impact of Native Tuition Waiver on Native student enrollment*

NO IMPACT	UNSURE/TOO EARLY TO DETERMINE IMPACT	IMPACT
MSU	PSU (unsure)	FLC
	U of Utah (unsure)	MSU-Denver
	UC System (too early)	UMN-Morris
	NAU (too early)	UNR
		U of Arizona
		U of Maine
		U of Oregon

## Impact of Retention and Graduation

We, also, polled survey respondents on the impact of the Native tuition waiver on Native and Indigenous student retention and graduation rates, and their responses are purely anecdotal. Survey respondents from UMN-Morris, UNR, and U of Oregon anecdotally reported that the tuition waiver increased both retention and graduation rates of Native and Indigenous students at their respective institutions. The U of Maine was the only institution that reported increased graduation rates.

Respondents from FLC, PSU, MSU–Denver, MSU, and U of Utah were not sure of the impact of retention and graduation. It was too soon to tell for UC–Berkeley (UC system), NAU, and the U of Arizona since these institutions implemented their tuition waivers in the 2022–23 academic year.

**Table 7**

*Reported Impact of Native Tuition Waiver on Native student retention and graduation*

INCREASED RETENTION & GRADUATION RATES	INCREASED GRADUATION RATES	NOT SURE OF IMPACT	TOO EARLY TO DETERMINE IMPACT
UNR	U of Maine	FLC	UC System
UMN–Morris		PSU	NAU
U of Oregon		MSU	U of Arizona
		MSU–Denver	
		U of Utah	

## DISCUSSION

This research study provides a broad overview of the structure and impact of tuition waivers for Native and Indigenous students across institution types and locations. In this section, we discuss the differences between state policies, funding mechanisms and coverage, implementation, and the impact on retention and graduation.

Nearly half of the tuition waiver programs reported in this study are supported by state policies. There are a few similarities and differences between the policies. The UMN–Morris, through Minnesota Statute 137.16, and FLC, through Colorado Revised Statutes (CRS) 23–52–105 provide full tuition waivers to any Native and Indigenous student who is enrolled in or descended from a federally recognized Tribal nation. Native and Indigenous students do not have to be Colorado or Minnesota residents. These two long–standing state policies are specific to UMN–Morris and FLC and have resulted in Native students from across the nation attending these institutions because of their well–known tuition waiver programs.

Michigan’s Public Act 174 (also known as the Michigan Indian Tuition Waiver Act) provides tuition waivers to any Native and Indigenous student enrolled in a federally recognized Tribal nation. However, students must be residents of

Michigan and attending a public institution. Oregon's and Nevada's state policies focus on tuition waiver programs for in-state students but have differing criteria for Tribal status. Oregon Senate Bill 312 grants resident (in-state) tuition and fee waivers at public institutions of higher education for Native American and Alaska Native students who have received a high school diploma from an Oregon high school. Nevada Assembly Bill 150 provides tuition and fee waivers to any in-state student enrolled in a federally recognized Tribe within the state of Nevada.

Maine and Utah's tuition waiver programs exist through their state's higher education system. The U of Maine system's Native American Waiver and Education Program covers tuition and mandatory fees for any Native and Indigenous student enrolled in a state-recognized Tribe located in Maine or a federally recognized Tribe and who is a resident of Maine. Additionally, a Native American Room and Board Grant is available to any Native American students living in residence halls on campus. It is need-based and covers students' room and board at a double room occupancy rate and standard meal plan. Through the Utah System of Higher Education, students who are enrolled in one of the federally recognized Tribal nations located in or contiguous with the state of Utah will be granted in-state resident status and tuition. Additionally, the U of Utah offers a Native Student Scholarship to those same students that covers the tuition and fees not covered by other scholarships and financial aid. The U of Maine was the only institution that indicated that their tuition waiver program was implemented by a Tribal agreement.

Interestingly, the three long-standing Native tuition waiver programs at FLC, MSU, and UMN-Morris are state-funded and the most inclusive of residency status. However, the Colorado and Minnesota state legislation is specific to their respective institutions and not implemented across all Colorado or Minnesota institutions of higher education. Similarly, three of the newly implemented programs at PSU, U of Maine, and the U of Oregon are state-funded and do not have a residency criterion. The more Native tuition waivers are inclusive of out-of-state students, the more higher education options Native and Indigenous students will have. States struggle with Tribal sovereignty and rarely commit funding toward any educational programs or support for Native and Indigenous students across PK-20 institutions. The lack of state-mandated Native tuition waiver programs is a direct result.

Though these tuition waiver programs serve Native and Indigenous students by providing funding assistance towards tuition and fees, the actual funding ranges across programs. Several institutions only cover tuition, another few cover tuition and mandatory fees, and a select few tuition waiver programs are designed as gap or last dollar grants, where all other financial aid is applied and then the program

provides funding for the remaining balance. Only two institutions provided substantial funding toward tuition and mandatory fees and beyond. The U of Maine offers a needs-based grant for room and board, and the U of Oregon provides full cost of attendance for a certain subset of Native and Indigenous students through a tiered program structure. These differences impact Native and Indigenous student access and engagement in institutions of higher education, as tuition waiver programs can be an important factor in students' decision-making process on what institution to attend.

FLC and UMN-Morris are well-known as Native-serving institutions within Indigenous communities because of their long-standing tuition waiver programs. However, their programs cover tuition costs only. Many incoming Native and Indigenous students may not be fully aware of the funding limitations of tuition waiver programs and differences in the full cost of attendance. Though institutions have developed web pages for their tuition waiver programs, many potential Native and Indigenous students do not know about these funding opportunities due to the limited reach of these web pages within Native communities.

The implementation of tuition waiver programs ranges widely from three well established institutions (FLC, MSU, and UMN-Morris), another four institutions that have established programs in the last 10 years (PSU, U of Maine, UNR, and U of Oregon), and five institutions that have implemented programs within the last year or will implement programs in Fall 2023 (MSU-Denver, NAU, UC Berkeley, U of Arizona, and U of Utah). As mentioned previously, the long-standing tuition waiver programs at FLC and UMN-Morris have earned them notoriety of being Native-serving institutions with institutional survey respondents reporting Native and Indigenous student enrollments of 45% and 30%, respectively. The UMN-Morris representative indicated that the tuition waiver also increased retention and graduation rates, but the FLC representative was unsure of its impact in those areas. Representatives from the U of Maine, UMN-Morris, UNR, and U of Oregon indicated an impact on retention and graduation, while PSU, MSU-Denver, MSU, and the U of Utah were unsure and NAU, U of Arizona, and UC-Berkeley (UC system) indicated it was too soon to tell. With nearly half of the reported tuition waiver programs in their first year of existence, it is imperative for institutions to understand the importance of data collection and analysis of the impact of these programs on Native and Indigenous students' access, retention, and graduation rates. Additionally, it is of critical importance that institutions share the data with Tribal leaders and Tribal education departments to help further Tribal and institutional efforts, support, and potential partnerships toward Native Nation building.

All differences across state policies, funding approaches, implementation, and retention and graduation impact tribal sovereignty and place. Tuition waiver programs have the potential to contribute directly to Native Nation building by increasing access, retention, and graduation rates of Native and Indigenous students. These programs can also serve as an effort to strengthen relationships between Tribal Nations and higher education institutions, but that is dependent on how they are administered. It is promising to see that many tuition waiver programs are inclusive of Tribal Nations located within the state and Tribal Nations that have traditional ties to the land within the state. This is an important aspect of these programs, as many Tribal Nations have been removed from the lands where they lived, roamed, hunted, and traded. Providing tuition waivers to Native and Indigenous students enrolled in Tribal Nations with traditional ties to the land provides pathways for those students to return to their traditional homelands. This is a major step toward institutions building meaningful relationships with Tribal Nations seeking to re-establish relationships with their traditional homelands, where all of these institutions are located.

It is important to acknowledge that there are other states with tuition waivers not included in our survey results, such as Massachusetts and Montana. Therefore, there is a need to build upon this nationwide study to reach all institutions with tuition waiver and tuition assistance programs to have a full understanding of the significance and impact of these programs on higher education access and attainment for Native and Indigenous students and Native Nation building.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we provide some recommendations because of this research study. This is inclusive of the voices of the professionals who answered the survey including the policies and impacts on Native student access to higher education. Our recommendations include implementing a Native tuition waiver statewide across institution types, providing comprehensive support for Native students and being inclusive of all Native students.

### **Implement statewide (university, community college, technical, etc.)**

Through the states and institutions that have implemented a form of Native tuition waiver, one thing that is clear is that it has benefited the institution through enrollment and access to higher education for Native students. We recommend that Washington state continue to pursue the passage and implementation of legislation for a Native tuition waiver that is comprehensive of costs for tuition, fees, books,

and housing. We recommend that this be done across institution types. This would provide access to Native students in higher education in insurmountable ways. Especially, considering that Tribal communities continue to be top employers and economic contributors in Washington. The Tribes in Washington state have created over [54,000 jobs](#) in the state. This recognizes and provides opportunities for Nation building for Native students as individuals as well as collectively within Tribal communities for years to come. This is why it is important to support statewide tuition waivers for Native students.

## Comprehensive support for Native students

The acknowledgement of sovereignty as well as how colonization is endemic to society per Tribal Critical Race Theory tenet (Brayboy, 2006), also acknowledges that historical trauma has permeated and made generational impacts on access to cultural capital<sup>4</sup> and literal economic capital. Because of this, we recommend comprehensive support for Native students attending post-secondary education should include providing for all costs and needs to fully participate in higher education. This includes fees not covered by tuition waiver, such as costs of books and room and board that are often left out of current Native tuition waivers. This is in alignment with the Resolution #2002-32 proposed by ATNI.

A critique of Native tuition waivers is that they are not comprehensive and are misleading in that they do not fully cover the costs of navigating higher education. Many of the institutions and states who responded to our survey did not provide this type of financial support. There should be more advocacy and awareness of this need for Native American students by state legislators, higher education policy advocates, and administrators. This may also engender a new term of reference that is not just tuition waiver-oriented but comprehensively represented.

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<sup>4</sup> Cultural capital refers to the ability to access knowledge about different areas and places because of generations before you having had access to that. It is a privilege for people who have had access to higher education for generations.



## Inclusive of all Native students

One of the ways that Native American tuition waivers can become more powerful and connected to asserting sovereignty and acknowledging the power of Tribal people as Nation builders is broadening eligibility for current Native tuition waivers. This includes the level of education that these tuition waivers cover by also including all graduate-level and professional-level degrees. While there are still needs for undergraduate and technical education support for Native students, there are far fewer funding options for Native students in post-graduate level education. There are gaps in access to furthering our professional Native career pathways due to Tribal nations' differing infrastructure to provide scholarship funding and support at this level of education. Native career pathways that require a sequence of master's and doctoral level education place a limitation on Native students to pursue them due to limited funding options from their Tribes. There is also a need for states, especially Washington state, to conceptualize how a statewide Native tuition waiver can provide access to Native students who are eligible based on descendency but are not currently Tribally enrolled, state-recognized Tribally enrolled Native students, and First Nations students who live within Washington state.

## CONCLUSION

This is the most comprehensive study of active tuition waivers for Native American students, to date. In recent years, several institutions have developed tuition waivers for Native American students. Tuition waivers are specific to the institution and are impacted by both internal and external factors, such as federal or state legislation or existing relationships with Tribal nations, with local or regional proximity to the institution. It is important that regardless of the external and internal factors for institutions and states, advocacy for Native student access to higher education be provided through comprehensive Native tuition waivers. This study highlights the diverse approaches to administering these tuition waivers to Native American students and their impact on Native American student enrollment and success. Future research building upon this study can show if these new tuition waiver programs are shifting Native American student enrollment and retention on a national level.



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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Survey Questions

- What institution are you responding for?
- What is your current position at the institution?
- What level of implementation/mandate does your institution's Native American Tuition Waiver currently have in place? (i.e. college/university specific, statewide mandated, etc.)
- Do you have a legislative mandate to support your Native American Tuition Waiver?
- How long has your Native American Tuition Waiver been in place?
- Who does your Native American Tuition Waiver serve (Check all that apply)?
- What is your current Native Student enrollment now (estimates are okay)?
- How has Native student enrollment been impacted after implementing a Native American Tuition Waiver?
- How is your Native American Tuition Waiver funded?
- What funding does your Native American Tuition Waiver cover (i.e. tuition, fees, housing, books, other costs)?
- Have you seen an impact on the retention and graduation of Native students as a result of the Native American Tuition Waiver at your institution?
- Any other comments/insights you would like to share?

## APPENDIX B

### Sample Recruitment Email

Greetings,

We would like to send this because we have identified you as a part of a state and institution/campus that currently has a Native American Tuition Waiver or something similar. We (Dr. Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn and Dr. Natalie Youngbull) are currently cultivating and piecing together the creation and current state of a Native American Tuition Waiver across institutions/campuses in the United States. We hope in cultivating a deeper understanding it will provide clarity for other states and institutions/campuses to consider one. We hope you will consider taking our survey which will take no longer than 15-20 minutes. Please know, your participation in this survey is voluntary and you can choose to not continue forward at any time. Your completion of the survey will enter you into a drawing for a \$100.00 gift card. Here is a link to the survey:

<https://forms.gle/YZKc1FtE5ohPQcbK7>

We greatly appreciate your time and your commitment to the advancement of Native students in higher education. If you can please fill this out by end of next Friday, May 26th. Many heartfelt Ah-ho's and Nease.

Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn (Kiowa citizen and descendant of the Apache, Nez Perce, Umatilla, and Assiniboine Nations) and Natalie Youngbull (Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma and descendant of the Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux tribes of Montana)