

The Path of Many JOURNEYS

The Benefits of Higher Education for Native People and Communities

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The Path of Many Journeys: The Benefits of Higher Education for Native People and Communities

This report outlines both the challenges of college participation and the benefits of investing in higher education for American Indians; it argues that higher education is one of the main drivers of economic and social development for all American Indian communities. It also discusses the role of tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) on reservations and their contribution to the well-being of tribal communities. The full report is available at www.ihep.org.

American Indians and Higher Education

A combination of historical, economic, social, demographic, and educational forces have shaped the challenges and constraints that American Indians face.

- ▶ Traditional forms of higher education have often been unsuccessful with American Indian populations owing to the striking differences in western and American Indian traditions, pedagogical approaches, and measures of success. Investment in higher education, especially in higher education suitable for the American Indian context, is crucial to bridging the divide of historical, economic, social, demographic, and educational forces between American Indians and the rest of the nation.

The profile of American Indian students who are able to enroll in college differs from those of all undergraduate students.

- ▶ More than a third of all American Indian students are 30 years or older, which puts them at risk for dropping out prior to earning a degree. Most (65 percent) are financially independent, compared to a national average of 50 percent.

Financial aid, particularly grant aid, is crucial to enable American Indian students to pursue a degree.

- ▶ The overwhelming majority of American Indian students apply for financial aid (80 percent in 2003–04) including federal financial aid (60 percent). Of the three main types of aid (federal, state, and institutional), American Indian students were most likely to receive federal aid (around 50 percent), and were more likely to receive grants (59 percent) than loans (32 percent).

Benefits of Investing in Higher Education for American Indians

Increased participation in higher education results in the accrual of benefits that address the specific historical, economic, and cultural background of American Indians, especially those who live on reservations.

- ▶ A person with a bachelor's degree or higher earns almost four times as much as a person who did not graduate from high school, and more than twice as much as a person who holds a high school diploma; this is true for American Indians and the U.S. population in general.

- ▷ Both TCU students and the colleges, contribute to the social health of reservation communities. TCUs offer a variety of social services for students and community members, such as family life and parenting courses and domestic and community violence prevention programs. Data from 2005 suggests that about half of graduates continued their education after graduating from TCUs, and of those, over 86 percent pursued a bachelor's degree.

Despite the clear benefits of higher education, many American Indians still do not go to college or attend the college of their choice, in large part because they cannot afford the price.

- ▷ American Indians, just like other college students in the United States, are facing unprecedented increases in tuition. On average, American Indian students faced tuitions of \$2,840, not including other expenses. These charges may seem low when compared to mainstream four-year institutions, but many American Indians are located in poverty-stricken areas where even these fees might constitute an entrance barrier.
- ▷ The fact that many American Indians must work to support themselves and their families means that they attend college and work at the same time, frequently working close to full time. Working more than 20 hours a week puts students at a greater risk of dropping out.

Recommendations

Each part of the higher education system can play a role in helping to increase the enrollment of more American Indian students in higher education:

- ▷ **Federal government agencies:** Increase funding for federal programs that are relevant to health, environmental issues, economic development, and other issues that impact American Indians on their path to higher education.
- ▷ **State and tribal governments:** Establish and increase state funding for each non-Indian state resident enrolled at a tribal college, and improve outreach to high schools regarding the availability of need-based state grant aid.
- ▷ **Mainstream colleges and universities:** Improve outreach efforts to tribal college students and their parents, and conduct local seminars on issues such as the admissions process, transferring credits, and financial aid.
- ▷ **Elementary and secondary systems:** Ensure that K-12 guidance counselors and other staff are aware of admissions practices at TCUs and other colleges, as well as the availability of state, tribal, and federal financial aid.
- ▷ **Community and philanthropic organizations:** Provide scholarships and support services to American Indian students who plan to attend college, and support community programs that are successful in reaching low-income, first generation American Indian college students.



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