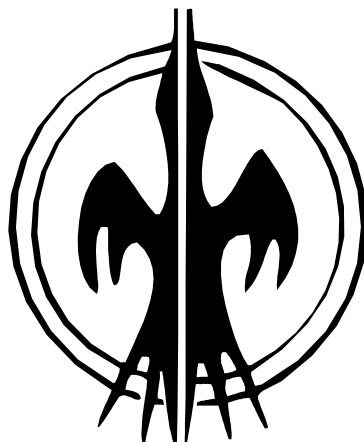


# WHO GOES TO TRIBAL COLLEGES?



**T**ribal College students share many traits, including some that present challenges in a higher education setting—such as family obligations and low household incomes. Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that students are satisfied with their experiences at Tribal Colleges and are completing degrees, transferring to four-year institutions, and finding gainful employment.

### *Composition of student bodies*

In general, Tribal Colleges provide access for local students who might not otherwise participate in higher education; in fact, most of those enrolled are the first generation in their family to go to college. American Indian students make up the majority of Tribal College student bodies.

Tribal College students are largely non-traditional—the typical student is often described as a single mother in her early 30s. The American Indian College Fund estimates that over half of Tribal College students are single parents. In addition, half of all Tribal College students attend on a part-time basis. In fall 1996, this ranged from 84 percent of undergraduates at Dull Knife Memorial College to less than 15 percent at the three federally chartered colleges (NCES, 1990-1997). Moreover, 73 percent of full-time undergraduates were American Indian, compared to 49 percent of part-time undergraduates.

Tribal Colleges serve a disproportionate number of female students. In fall 1996, 56 percent of undergraduates at all public institutions were women, while 64 percent of all Tribal College undergraduates were

women. This differed by institution: 76 percent of undergraduates at Sisseton Wahpeton Community College were female, compared to only 46 percent at Haskell Indian Nations University (NCES, 1990-1997).

*Student financial aid*

Financial aid is a critical resource for Tribal College students. Despite relatively low family income levels, however, they tend to have less access to the range of financial aid available to other students. For example, state and institutional sources together account for 25 percent of aid provided to all US college students, but less than 1 percent of aid provided to Tribal College students (AIHEC and The Institute, 1996).

Tribal College students receive the majority of their financial aid through the federal Pell Grant program. In 1996-97, more than 7,000 Tribal College students received Pell Grants, with an average award of \$1,629. This represented nearly 35 percent of all Tribal Col-

**Student profile**

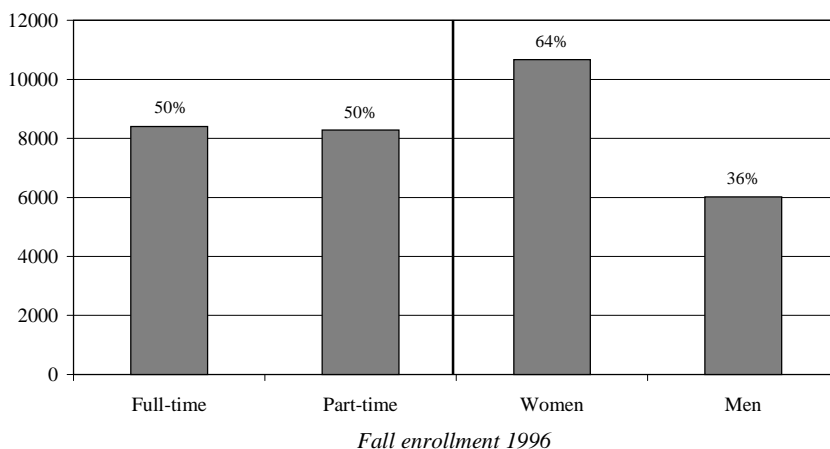
Paula Healy, a student at Fort Belknap College and an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, exemplifies the typical tribal college student. She is majoring in business and has been able to achieve a 4.0 grade point average. She plans to continue her education at Montana State University. Meanwhile, she is raising four children and hopes to graduate from college before her oldest son graduates from high school (American Indian College Fund, 1998b).

lege undergraduates; however, the proportion of students receiving Pell Grants varied by institution, from 17 percent at Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College to 70 percent at the Institute of American Indian Arts (ED, 1996-1997).<sup>1</sup> It is important to recognize that despite their low incomes, many Tribal Col-

lege students may not receive Pell Grants due to a combination of their attendance patterns—many students take very few credit hours—and low tuition levels. In addition, many Tribal College students fail to apply for financial aid at all.

Financial aid support from other sources remains limited. Tribal Colleges generally do not participate in the campus-based Perkins Loan program, and very few Tribal College students borrow Stafford

**Aggregate Composition of Undergraduate Student Bodies**



Source: NCES, 1990-97

Loans—in 1994-95, only about 200 students borrowed just over \$400,000 (AIHEC and The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1996). Approximately 8 percent of Tribal College students received Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants in 1996-97, with an average award of \$411. In addition, about 3 percent of Tribal College students received an average of \$851 in federal work-study funds. These average awards are lower than those of mainstream institutions due to “grandfather” clauses in the legislation that favor older institutions that have participated in the programs the longest (Billy, 1998). State grant funds are very low, averaging only \$145 per undergraduate student at the 23 Tribal Colleges reporting that their students received such funding (ED, 1996-1997). To supplement government funding, many Tribal College students receive aid from private sources, including the American Indian College Fund, which raises money for scholarships.

#### *Signs of student success*

Many factors lead to longer times to degree for Tribal College students. As noted earlier, the majority attend on a part-time basis. Many Tribal College students lack basic reading, writing, and math skills when they enroll (Tierney, 1992). Furthermore, many students are forced to skip semesters or “stop out” because of family obligations or inadequate financial resources. Nevertheless, there is evidence that Tribal Colleges are doing an effective job of educating their students. For example, Tribal College students are earning degrees, transferring to four-year institutions, and obtaining jobs. In addition, anecdotal reports from Tribal College admissions officers indicate that American Indian students may be choosing Tribal Colleges over mainstream institutions.

This is supported by the previously mentioned data on comparative enrollment of American Indian students, and by the fact that many Tribal College presidents believe that the student bodies of their colleges are gradually becoming younger.

Although information on the number of Tribal College students earning degrees is limited, available data suggest that a significant percentage of Tribal College students are completing degrees. At the 16 colleges that reported completions data for 1996-97, 936 degrees were awarded, including 409 associate’s degrees, 58 bachelor’s degrees, and 2 master’s degrees. Of all of these degrees, 84 percent were awarded to American Indian/Alaskan Native students and 67 percent were awarded to women (NCES, 1990-1997).

A substantial proportion of Tribal College students continue on to four-year institutions after earning a degree at a Tribal College, most of which have strong relationships with state colleges and universities to facilitate transfers. For example, about 70 percent of students at D-Q University transfer to four-year colleges after earning an associate’s degree (American Indian College Fund, 1996). At the same time, the American Indian College Fund (1998a) estimates that Tribal College students who transfer to mainstream institutions are more likely to complete their degrees than American Indian students who went straight to mainstream institutions. One study of students from Salish Kootenai College found that American Indian students who had attended the college and then transferred to the University of Montana earned higher grade point averages and had higher graduation rates than American Indian

students who had gone to the university directly from high school (Zaglauer, 1993).

Another important measure of success is the relatively low unemployment rate of Tribal College graduates, especially given the high rates prevalent on most reservations. Although comprehensive data are currently unavailable, isolated studies have found reason for optimism. A survey of Turtle Mountain Community Col-

lege graduates from 1980 to 1990 found that less than 13 percent were unemployed, in contrast with a much higher rate of unemployment of 55 percent on the reservation as a whole (Boyer, 1997; American Indian College Fund, 1996). Other colleges have reported high percentages of graduates who are employed: Crownpoint Institute of Technology, 85 percent; Little Big Horn College, 87 percent; and Oglala Lakota College, 93 percent (Boyer, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup>Fiscal Operations Report and Application to Participate (FISAP) data for 1996-97 is missing information from Fort Belknap College, Cheyenne River Community College, White Earth Tribal and Community College and Little Priest Tribal College.