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For Native Americans, Tribal Colleges Tackle the 'Present-Day Work of Our Ancestors'

As the first installment in a series on Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), the Center for American Progress and American Indian College Fund explore the contribution TCUs play in their communities and why investing in them should be a priority for policymakers.

Lee Sanderson of Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint, New Mexico, and students at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona, in front of the Diné College campus in Tsaile, Arizona, on Oct. 7, 2022.

Author
Kevin Mahnken
Reviewed by
Sarah Mathews
Edited by
Lisa M. Hernandez

Advancing Racial Equity and Justice, Education, Educational Research & Policy, K-12 Education

FACT OF A KIND
Ryan Red Corn
Tribal Finance

MEDIA CONTACT
Lisa Hernandez
Senior Press
lhernandez@americanprogress.org
202.483.2700 ext. 3 (Eastern time)

GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
Shaniza Shajahan
Senior Director, Government Affairs
shajahan@americanprogress.org

This column contents an update.

Author's note: Every "Indian Country" quiz in this column lesson 4 is *frequently used* by Tribal nations to describe their communities.

When the contemporary Tribal colleges took off in the late 1960s and early 1970s, their founders sustained classes into wherever spaces they could find, including trailers, sheds, church basements, an unused storage transport depot in Montana, and a condemned building in South Dakota in which "exploitation was left in the air and present-day" because of a poisoned water well.

Such was the need and desire to preserve and advance Native American culture, language, and tradition, that these institutions became accredited universities that were taking American Indian and Alaskan Native students. And such was the lack of resources the founders faced as they grappled to establish sustainable teaching institutions.

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A half-century later, accredited Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) serve about twenty thousand students, and they have a lot to show for their endurance. Founded in the American West and Midwest, all offer associate degrees and certificate programs, about half offer bachelor's degree programs, and a handful offer master's degrees. Nearly all TCUs are Tribal Nation Institutions, either benefiting a Tribal Nation initiative or opportunity for Native instruction and strengthening TCUs, these institutions are the only colleges in some of the rural communities they serve, and they are the only colleges that offer, for the most part, an open-enrollment institution serving non-Native students as well, currently about 90 percent of TCU students are non-Native.

Policymakers, particularly at the federal level, must look to TCUs as important partners in sustaining Indigenous communities through economic security, health, and cultural vitality.

Tribal colleges educate students for a whole spectrum of careers—from teaching to nursing to business administration to engineering—and they train law enforcement—while also preparing students to be leaders and Tribal citizens and offering programs in Native language studies and cultural preservation. In Alaska Native communities, TCUs are the only institutions that offer vocational training facilities for hard by the pandemic, reaching traditional Tribal practices such as harvesting wild rice, and giving elders technology skills to email or FaceTime with faraway grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

TCUs over the past 50 years have generated highly endorsed languages, additional poverty and other related inequities that are legacies of U.S. government policies, provided access to higher education for students who, for the most part, have been underserved by other institutions, and they have helped Native American overcome the disproportionate force of the racial livelihood from COVID-19. Despite their many achievements, Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) are underfunded and underpaid, and they have the potential—and, in turn, to provide equitable education opportunities to Native people so that they may do the same.

Only 14 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native adults have at least an associate degree. The need is stop-up support for Tribal colleges is clear. The Biden-Harris administration has made both a commitment and a responsive partnership to sustaining Indigenous communities through economic security, health, and cultural vitality.

Figure 1

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) include community colleges, 4-year institutions, and universities with graduate degrees

Location and enrollment size of the 35 accredited TCUs in the United States.

Hover or click for more detail

Note: Enrollment data for TCUs with campuses in the United States, which are not shown on the map, are as follows: Navajo Technical University, 2,000–5,000; Diné College, 2,000–5,000; Salish Kootenai College, 2,000–5,000; Northwest Indian College, 2,000–5,000; Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, 2,000–5,000; Oglala Lakota College, 2,000–5,000; Sitting Bull College, 2,000–5,000; Cankdeska Cikana Community College, 2,000–5,000; Little Big Horn College, 2,000–5,000; Blackfeet Community College, 2,000–5,000; Fort Belknap College, 2,000–5,000; Fort Peck Community College, 2,000–5,000; Leech Lake Tribal College, 2,000–5,000; Red Lake Nation College, 2,000–5,000; Bay Mills Community College, 2,000–5,000; Little Priest Tribal College, 2,000–5,000; Ho-Chunk Nation College, 2,000–5,000; Haskell Indian Nations University, 2,000–5,000; Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, 2,000–5,000; Navajo Nation Tribal

Jan Gardipe (pictured) is finding ways to share the Salish language with her own kids, her extended family, and other children and adults.

Jan Gardipe, 50, left her job of many years working in human resources for the CSKT government to become a Salish language apprentice and to study education at SKC. She loved it so much, she's now in the culture and language studies degree program as well. Learning the history of American Indian education made her realize that, as someone who grew up without the language of her forbears, she experienced intergenerational trauma stemming from the abusive boarding school system designed to forcibly—and cruelly—assimilate Native Americans.

Gardipe is now charged up about helping to heal her people by finding ways to share the Salish language with her own kids, her extended family, and other children and adults. She was inspired by the metaphor another student used: The language apprentices will collectively spark "little Salish fires" across the nearly two-thousand square miles of the Flathead Reservation. Meanwhile, studying Salish around the clock for two years changed her deeply.

"It provides me with confidence in myself," she said. "Knowing who I am and what our people have gone through and where we're at. Feeling whole."

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** **Update, January 12, 2023:** This column has been updated to reflect that the series will now feature three installments, not four.*

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AUTHORS

Marcella Bombardieri
Senior Fellow

Dina M. Horwedel
Director of Public Education, American Indian College Fund

TEAM

Higher Education Policy
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