A Profile of Tribal Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

Every Learner Everywhere was awarded a grant to collaborate with other higher education service providers to offer professional development for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs). To help providers of services better understand the needs of these institutions, Every Learner Everywhere has been tasked with providing profiles of each type of institution based on current literature, government and advocacy organization publications, and conversations with faculty, staff, and students. A special emphasis of this series of profiles is the opportunities and challenges of digital learning at each institutional type.

This profile examines the culture at TCUs. Tribal leaders, historians, educational researchers, and journalists have noted the unique role of these institutions that center on **preservation** and **revitalization** of tribal bonds as well as preservation and revitalization of the knowledge and culture of the first nations on the land stolen from them to create the United States.

Indigenous students are thriving at TCUs.[1] According to a 2019 report by Gallup with support from the American Indian College Fund, students at TCUs feel more supported and connected, and they graduate at higher rates than their peers enrolled at other institutions of higher education. In addition, TCU graduates report less college debt, greater engagement with their work and with their tribal community, and greater overall well-being than comparison groups.[2]

TCU alumni report better outcomes than graduates from other comparison groups in their community, social and career wellbeing. These graduates possess a strong sense of engagement in the areas where they live, have strong relationships and love in their lives, and feel fulfilled in how they occupy their time by liking what they do every day.[3]

In addition to superior outcomes for TCU students and alumni, TCU institutions, in collaboration with tribal leaders and government agencies, are leading the way in climate change research aimed at finding solutions that preserve and revitalize the land.[4] Native tribes have a long history of both sustainable land management and having to adapt to living on lands that are challenging for subsistence cultures. The TCU research on climate change solutions contributes to the preservation of tribal sovereignty and cultural identity as well as providing solutions for the surrounding non-tribal communities.[5]

OF SPECIAL NOTE

Terms: A key feature of a nation's sovereignty is its peoples' ability to define themselves on their own terms. Indigenous peoples have historically not been afforded that prerogative by those who stole and colonized their lands. Indigenous peoples often introduce themselves as members of a particular tribe or nation. Tribal and nation names are the preferred term for referring to a single group or related groups. When referring to multiple tribal peoples or indigenous groups in the aggregate, the term American Indian was popular before the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, when it was replaced by the term Native American. Native American is a term that attempts to correct the error of explorers who thought they had reached the country of India when landing in North America. However, some indigenous peoples find the use of Native offensive as it may conjure harmful stereotypes such as primitivity. Both terms are in wide use today. Native American is used by the [Native American Rights Fund](#) and news outlets [Native American Today](#) and [Native American Times](#) as well as several professional organizations. American Indian is the preferred term for the [American Indian Higher Education Consortium](#) (AIHEC), the [American Indian College Fund](#), and the [National Museum of the American Indian](#) (NMAI).

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's identities might combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege.[6] It is important to acknowledge that many students at tribal colleges and universities hold intersectional racial identities.

BY THE NUMBERS

37
INSTITUTIONS[7]
(35 of which are accredited across 15 states)

16,336
STUDENTS[8]
(Undergraduate and graduate as of 2021)

In terms of TCU credentialing:[9]

35 TCUs offer certificates and apprenticeships
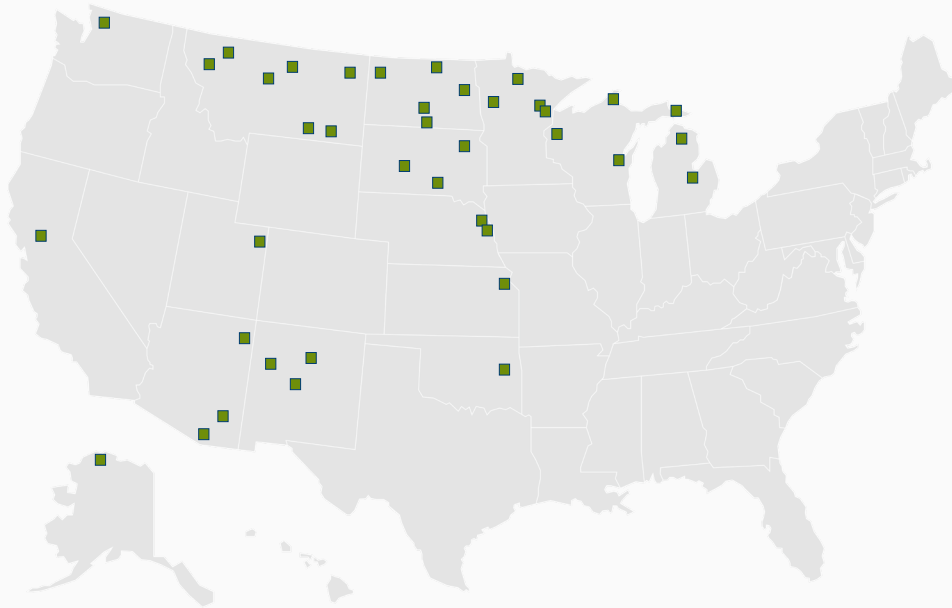
35 TCUs offer associate degrees

9 TCUs offer bachelor degrees

7 TCUs offer advanced degrees

AIHEC, "TCU Locations," n.d., www.aihec.org/tcu-locations/.

Definition of TCUs

The federal government of the United States defines an "Indian tribe" as an "Indian or Alaska Native tribe, band, nation, pueblo, village, or community that the Secretary of the Interior acknowledges to exist as an Indian tribe pursuant to the Federally Recognized Indian Tribe List Act of 1994, 25 U.S.C. 479a."[10]

A TCU is an educational institution chartered by a Native tribe that maintains, preserves, and restores Native languages and cultural traditions, offers high-quality college education, and provides career and technical education opportunities. According to the American Indian College Fund, all TCUs must meet three criteria: being chartered and run by a federally recognized tribe; having a board of trustees that is majority Native American; and having Native American students account for at least 51 percent of enrollees.[11]

These institutions are known for their culturally relevant programs and higher education opportunities in workforce development, native arts and history, as well as degree programs such as are found at other institutions of higher education. Often located on or near reservation lands, TCUs play a crucial role in supporting Native American communities by providing educational opportunities while aiming to fulfill the mission of tribal self-determination and service to their respective communities. According to the U.S. Department of the Interior, "Some reservations are the remnants of a tribe's original land base. Others were created by the federal government for the resettling of Indian people forcibly relocated from their homelands. Not every federally recognized tribe has a reservation."[12]

The first tribal college, Navajo Community College, now called Diné College, was founded in 1968. There are now 37 TCUs, with more institutions seeking to achieve TCU status in the future. Thus, even though they were founded to preserve ancient traditions, TCUs are relatively new institutions, established to replace the culturally insensitive, cruel, and often violent education attempts of North American colonizers going back to the mid-1600s and lasting through the early 1990s. It is important to note that, despite being operated by the tribes, TCUs do not restrict enrollment to tribal members. In fact, TCUs provide critical access to higher education in areas that would otherwise be designated as education deserts. About 20 percent of students at TCUs are not affiliated with a tribe and do not identify as Native American or American Indian.[13]

Characteristics of TCUs

When Native American veterans returned home after serving the United States in World War II, they began to advocate for tribal self-determination, including the right to control the education of their children.[14] After centuries of colonial, Christian, and federal attempts to eliminate Native language and culture, in 1975 Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. This law gave tribes authority over programs and services provided by the federal government; it allowed them to create their own schools and allowed parents to send their children to schools not run by or subcontracted out through the federal government.[15] However, TCUs had already grown out of the Tribal College Movement of the 1960s. While each institution has its own unique history and cultural focus, "Their core mission and identity are to rebuild Indigenous nations through the teaching of **tribal histories**, **languages**, and **cultures**. They accomplish this by emphasizing cultural preservation and revitalization."[16] TCUs also both "provide … community employment opportunities and serve as educators of current and potential employees on reservations."[17] This is part of rebuilding indigenous nations. In this section, we will discuss what preservation and revitalization mean in the context of TCUs.

Cultural preservation is a necessary step in regaining what was stolen or destroyed by centuries of attempts at assimilation and, in some cases, ethnic cleansing. Preservation looks back through the generations[18] to honor tribal ancestors, their traditions, their values, and their stories. Tribal preservation has many aspects, but at TCUs there is an emphasis on language preservation because "languages hold the keys to what concepts are important and unique to a culture and what ideas make up the world view associated with various cultures."[19] In a recent interview, Provost of Navajo Technical University Dr. Colleen Bowman affirmed the role of language preservation at her institution:

> **Our institution requires all of our students to take at least one Navajo culture class as part of their degree requirements. *So they have to learn something about themselves*. They can be learning about *their history*, *their language*, *their culture*, whatever it is. They will take those courses.[20]**

According to a 2023 report by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Today, approximately 167 Indigenous languages are spoken in the U.S., and it's estimated that only 20 will remain by 2050."[21] Because of the language preservation efforts of TCUs, the outlook for indigenous languages is not as dire as it once was, even as the situation is still critical.

Revitalization looks ahead to future generations. Decisions made today regarding revitalization will ripple through future generations, determining their well-being. According to TCU advocates and professionals Cheryl CrazyBull and Justin Guillory, TCUs have been the catalyst for revitalization efforts in Native American communities: "They became institutions in which tribal social norms, traditional practices, and kinship are revitalized in ways that are representative of the functional societies of our tribal past. TCUs believe that the social burdens experienced by our communities can be ameliorated by cultural restoration."[22] Jon Reyhner and Jeanna Eder add, "The renewal of traditional Native cultures [and languages] in and out of school is reestablishing a sense of community and is fighting the materialistic, hedonistic, and individualistic forces of the popular culture."[23] This sentiment is echoed by Dr. Bowman:

> **Our students are our strength. They're the strength that balances all of us as a way of being. And we're teaching them those skills that they're going to need, those technical knowledge pieces that they need. Because they're going to be the next generation who are going to be in a position to help continue to build a society.[24]**

By educating and training the next generation of medical professionals, legal professionals, activists, artists, business leaders, journalists, and scientists, TCUs are at the forefront of ensuring the continued and future well-being of tribal peoples, tribal lands, and tribal cultures.

TCUs: Preservation and Revitalization

This section will explore how TCUs operationalize preservation and revitalization for both students and tribal communities.

Cultural Relevance

Language is the heart of tribal colleges: TCUs play a vital role in preserving and revitalizing indigenous languages and traditions, strengthening cultural identity and community cohesion. To achieve this, TCUs integrate indigenous knowledge, languages, and perspectives into their academic programs, fostering a sense of cultural connection and validation for students. This makes learning more meaningful and engaging. As Marcella Bombardieri and Dina M. Horwedel, Director of Public Education at the American Indian College Fund, write, "In essence, not only are TCUs tied to their communities and cultures, but they are also at the center of nation-building and cultural preservation efforts in Indigenous communities—and that is central to their missions."[25]

According to AIHEC's Quick Facts on TCUs regarding American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) Language Fluency, 51 percent have none, 41 percent have limited fluency, 4 percent have conversational fluency, and 3 percent are fluent.[26] Dr. Bowman urges tribal college students to reclaim and embrace their heritage and their language:

Don't park your indigenous being at the door … Your indigenous knowledge is what sets you apart from everybody else because you have something that they don't. And we are valuing it. *No longer are you being discounted for your language, your culture, and your actual lived experiences*. We're saying, 'Here's the piece of Western knowledge. Now, what does [the] Navajo [language] say about that?'[27]

But, as Dr. Bowman suggests, there is much more on offer at TCUs than language preservation.

Tribal college students have a wide range of choices regarding degree types and disciplines to support their learning about their heritage. TCUs offer certificates in tribal management, native languages, native legal studies, native arts, and gaming and casino management.[28] They also offer bachelor's degrees in Native American studies, tribal management, native environmental sciences, native land and forest management, and tribal historic preservation and museum studies.[29] And it doesn't even stop there: advanced degrees include a master's degree in Diné culture, language, and leadership and Lakota leadership and management[30] and the first tribal college PhD in Diné culture and language sustainability.[31]

Having a faculty and staff that are culturally competent and representative of the diverse backgrounds of Native American students can contribute to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. During the federal boarding school era, most if not all teachers were nonnative and did not connect to students culturally. Allen Taylor, a student at Intermountain Indian School during the federal boarding school era, expressed that "It's kind of hard to get along with grownups – to talk about things that are serious when you don't know anything about it. With teachers it's the same way if you don't understand each other's problems and are too shy to talk about it."[32] Today, awareness and active learning of student culture are at the heart of TCU pedagogy practices.

Faculty and staff at TCUs may have a better understanding of the cultural backgrounds of their students, creating a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. According to a 2018 report by AIHEC, the percentage of AI/AN faculty fell from 47 percent in 2007 to 44 percent in 2017, but overall TCU staff rose from 57 percent in 2007 to 64 percent in 2017.[33] This figure is especially important because many TCU staff teach on top of their regular workload, so, while they would not be counted among the faculty, they are engaging with students in meaningful ways. To further help faculty develop learning experiences for their tribal students, AIHEC and the American Indian College Fund provide support programs for TCU faculty and many TCUs also provide cultural workshops to help faculty blend indigenous culture and perspectives within any curriculum.

Dr. Majel Boxer, Chair and Associate Professor of Native American Indigenous Studies (NAIS) at Fort Lewis College (FLC), a Native American-serving, non-tribal institution, spoke about how she decreases barriers for courses in which a predominance of the enrollees are Native American:

I try to really treat all students as adults, and try to reaffirm that they have a full life outside of the classroom. So what that means for me is I have policies that are, if you have to be out of class to take care of business then go do it and come back when you're able to. I try not to be punitive in the classroom.

(Continued on next page)

These policies are so hard and rigid that you're afraid of the class. I try to be really flexible in my approach to attendance. I'm also flexible where I set deadlines and then have availability on Canvas that extends either through the weekend, and giving some buffer. About 95% of things that would be late aren't late. You just need a few extra days, everyone's busy and has complex lives, so that wiggle room is helpful. Students can also submit one late assignment anytime, not penalized, for real true emergencies.[34]

Dr. Boxer has found success through having lenient classroom policies, which in turn boost student retention within her courses. In addition to attendance and due date policies, Dr. Boxer also eliminates accessibility barriers by having required books and primary sources available online through FLC's online Canvas course page.[35] A 1982 AIHEC survey found that "Indian students who completed a course of study at a TCU went on to complete a four-year degree program at senior institutions with a 75% greater success rate than Indian students who bypassed TCUs and went directly to four-year institutions."[36]

Many TCUs offer flexible learning options, such as evening classes, online courses, and part-time programs, to accommodate the needs of students who may have other responsibilities, such as work or family obligations. Additionally, TCUs offer tailored support for students who may face academic challenges due to historical inequities or language barriers. Because of their relatively small size in terms of enrollments, TCUs offer smaller class sizes and closer faculty–student relationships, leading to stronger support and guidance for students. TCUs also tend to connect students with indigenous faculty, staff, and community leaders who serve as role models and mentors, providing guidance and inspiration.

In addition to supportive learning environments, TCUs offer curriculums that align with tribal values and goals. They often connect learning to the land and traditional ecological knowledge, promoting environmental stewardship and cultural understanding. Cheryl CrazyBull writes about how the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has partnered with TCUs to conduct research on land and animal management:

Land grant status has been in existence for the majority of the tribal colleges since 1994. This status granted us increased access to USDA programs and resources allowing us to expand the research and educational services of our institutions in natural resources, environmental sciences, and many other programs related to the land and the animal and the plant nations.[37]

The USDA also offers a fellowship and four-year scholarship programs for TCU students. Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College's Environmental Institute is centered on education, research, and outreach. According to the Institute's website,

The Environmental Institute's sustainability initiatives not only strengthen community resilience, but also balance the social/ecological needs of the community. It has resources on campus to teach green living through gardening, beekeeping, green energy, and forestry.[38]

United Tribes Technical College connects the link between tribal reservation ecology and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) research. This program provides access to critical research projects in STEM fields to students who might not have that opportunity otherwise by conducting the research on reservations. The research also marries tribal land preservation efforts with government conservation programs.[39]

As evidenced from the collaborations between TCUs and advocacy organizations and between TCUs and government programs, TCUs look to provide their students access to resources, internships, and career development opportunities. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has at least 10 partnership programs with various tribes to further research, preservation, and tribal agency in matters concerning clean and safe air, water, and land.[40]

Navajo Technical University (NTU) has collaboration resources for students within the mental health field space with QPR Institute:[41]

> **Just as CPR helps anyone save a life in a medical emergency, QPR is a simple educational program that teaches how to recognize a mental health emergency and get a person at-risk the help they need. In these trainings, certified QPR Gatekeeper instructors teach the three steps anyone can learn to help prevent suicide: Question, Persuade, and Refer. The more people trained in QPR, the more lives are saved.[42]**

NTU also collaborates with Kognito,[43] an experiential learning platform designed to improve student mental health, retention, and learning.[44]

More about holistic support services for students at TCUs can be found at the American Indian College Fund's student resources page,[45] as well as by reviewing their student success initiatives with institutions.[46] Also, Achieving the Dream, in collaboration with TCUs, developed a resource called *Tribal College and University Holistic Student Support Redesign: A Toolkit for Redesigning Advising and Student Services to Effectively Support Every Student*. Six TCUs highlight their student success initiatives as part of that project.[47]

However, it is not just the programs housed within TCU buildings that support their students; the buildings themselves are often intentionally created to support the spiritual and physical well-being of the campus community, including the tribal community. Many TCU campuses are designed to incorporate tribal art, storytelling spaces, and plant knowledge. In the 1990s, American architectural historian Carol Herselle Krinsky documented the ways American tribes were reclaiming the built environment of reservations by building and renovating structures that reflect tribal culture and art.[48] A newer built campus, Little Big Horn College, began working with native architects from the beginning to develop a campus that reflects the geometrical shapes in Crow tribal art[49] as well as facilities that center the community.[50] In 2015, Red Lake Nation Tribal College completed construction of new facilities that feature an eagle-in-flight façade with large windows to take in the view of Red Lake and the surrounding landscape.[51] The cafeteria area has seven window bays, representing the seven teachings of the Anishinabe Tribe.[52]

In addition, tribal-focused campus museums contribute to the preservation of local indigenous culture. Haskell University has its own cultural center that preserves local history as well as its own history as a former government boarding school. According to its mission statement, the Haskell Cultural Center and Museum "serves as a steward of living Tribal materials, traditions and cultural arts."[53] The two facilities are open to the University community as well as to local communities and the visiting public and often feature educational programming as well as hosting cultural events. Not only is the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA) at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) home to the largest collection of contemporary American Indian art but the building itself reflects the culture of local tribal communities. The facility was purchased in 1990 and underwent an exterior and interior renovation to reflect both parts of the Pueblo-Revival style of the building. Another renovation in 2004 expanded the museum, allowing for more exhibits and educational spaces.[54]

Sports & Extracurricular Activities

TCUs with infrastructure and funding are able to create sports programs for students. The most common sports programs across TCUs include football, lacrosse, cross country, track, and basketball. These teams are often part of the United States Collegiate Athletic Association (USCAA).[55] Many TCUs also offer culturally relevant sports such as rodeo and archery and compete through national organizations such as the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA) and the U.S. Collegiate Archery Association (USCA).

TCUs are also home to athletic clubs based on indigenous games.[56] Intercollegiate Native games are governed by the AIHEC Athletic Commission. According to its constitutional bylaws, "TCU athletics share the common values of culture, respect, wellness, and leadership as the cornerstones of their program. AIHEC-sanctioned athletic competition is an equal privilege with academics acknowledged as the priority for students."[57] At the annual AIHEC Student Conference, students compete in a 5k run, archery, and hand games, as well as taking part in traditional dance and competitions in science, poetry, speech, critical inquiry, business, and other academic areas.

TCU Royalty

TCUs adopt royalty as an opportunity for native student leaders to be recognized and represent their peers at communal and national events. These leaders then return to campus to share their collected resources with their peers. Although royalty stems from Western civilizations, TCUs reshape the selection process, replace Western royalty attire with traditional wear, and conclude with a pow-wow celebration. It's important to note that royalty, particularly princess pageants, is more common amongst nations or larger tribes than it would be in small pueblos. Fort Lewis College (FLC), a Native American–serving non-tribal institution (NASI-NTI), opens royalty applications to all Native American students regardless of whether or not a student's home tribe participates in royalty or pow-wow.

Native students at FLC are judged based on public speaking and cultural showcases. Marisa Gutierrez (Santa Clara and San Juan Pueblo), a junior at FLC and current president of the FLC Pueblo Alliance Executive Team, highlights the importance of open application and preservation of traditional practices. Regarding the traditional showcase, Marisa expresses,

That was probably my favorite part. I attended the showcase last year and just seeing how everyone is representing their tribes. I know we have an Alaska Native student who is running for Hozhoni ambassador, so it's cool to see what she'll do and I'll get to learn more about her culture.

While princess pageants have a longer tradition, more recently tribes and schools have been adding prince or Mr. [insert tribe name] Nation contests, similar to princess pageants in that they are attached to scholarships and opportunities to travel as a tribal or school ambassador. Pageant winners often go on to leadership positions in their tribal communities and within national Native American advocacy organizations.[58]

Community

Because they are often chartered by individual tribes or affiliated tribes in a particular region, TCUs tend to have strong ties to the local Native American communities. This engagement helps build a sense of community and support for students, both academically and personally. TCUs encourage students to engage with their communities through service projects, tribal governance, and advocacy efforts, fostering future leaders. TCU graduates are encouraged and celebrated for giving back to their tribal community. On the second installment of the EdUp Tribal Colleges & Universities podcast, Dr. Manoj Patel, President of Little Priest Tribal College, spoke with pride about how several graduates of Little Priest went on to earn advanced degrees at other institutions and then returned to the Winnebago Reservation to take jobs there.[59] In her keynote speech at the AIHEC Student Conference on March 10, 2024, Lt. Governor of Minnesota Peggy Flanagan, a citizen of the White Earth Nation, urged students to use their education to advance the interests and well-being of their tribes.[60] When given a standing ovation recalling her reelection win, making her the highest elected Native American state official in the United States, she stated emphatically, "It's not about me. It's about us moving forward together."[61]

Collaborative efforts between TCUs and tribal communities often result in programs and initiatives that address specific needs and challenges faced by the tribal community. However, it is important to restate that TCUs do not only serve tribal members. TCUs are often located in rural areas that would otherwise be categorized as education deserts. About 20 percent of TCU students are nonnative, demonstrating their value to their local communities beyond the tribal community.[62] Long-time tribal college leaders Dr. Linda Sue Warner and Dr. Gerald E. Gipp write in *Tradition and Culture in the Millennium: Tribal Colleges and Universities* that,

TCUs have broadened their services to include developmental education, adult education, GED, community education as well as a variety of technical and vocational programs. TCUs find themselves allocating resources towards the preparation of our students. We also find ourselves serving broader community based needs in order to build community literacy and to ensure support for education throughout our population.[63]

TCUs often operate with a governance structure that involves tribal leadership, ensuring that the college's goals align with the priorities and values of the tribal community. Tribal leaders may actively participate in decision-making processes, helping to shape the direction of the institution and advocate for the needs of Native American students.

Spiritual Foundation

The close connection between TCUs and tribal communities is also strengthened by their shared spiritual foundations. It is common for college functions to open and close with prayer, for prayer and meditation spaces to be intentionally incorporated on campus, and for the campus to host spiritual events. "There is a holistic quality to spirituality in Native communities that is decidedly lacking in mainstream American society, which cordons off spirituality from the public sphere and the everyday grind of the workweek."[64]

Reverence for elders and for the land is a key tenet of Native American spirituality. Academic programs often incorporate elders as guest instructors;[65] elders lead pipe ceremonies at important functions such as graduation;[66] and the experiences and needs of elders are emphasized in professional training programs such as healthcare and law.[67] According to a project called Land-Grab Universities, nearly 11 million acres of tribal land were seized from 250 tribal nations under the 1852 Morrill Act to provide land for 52 universities across the United States.[68] This loss has made it imperative for tribes to ensure the viability of the lands on which they live and their sovereignty over them. A "Land Back" movement has led to some tribes regaining ancestral lands. "Many nations are also now finding ways to regain some of the ancestral terrain they lost, such as by purchasing property, cultivating land donations, and partnering with conservation groups and agencies."[69] To meet the need for preservation of the land, many TCUs offer undergraduate and graduate programs in tribal environmental science and tribal land management. These programs are designed to benefit tribal communities by preserving and protecting native plants, revitalizing ecosystems, finding solutions for habitat fragmentation, and promoting sustainable agricultural and husbandry practices.

Pow-wow

Pow-wow events create opportunities for students to dance, sing, drum, and represent their tribe, nation, or pueblo. Pow-wow can be particularly desirable for native students who aren't attending college near their local reservation or who don't practice pow-wow at their home reservation. Sherrole Benton, an author at the *Tribal College Journal*, highlights the importance pow-wow had during her educational experience:

> **When I was a college student, I was often the only Indian person in most of my classes. That meant always being alert for any attack whether physical, spiritual, or intellectual. Whenever Indian people find themselves alone among other groups of people, they have to believe in the goodness of humanity and trust the powers above that they'll be safe.**

(Continued on next page)

This experience takes a lot of energy out of a person. So whenever I felt as if I needed to regain my perspective or refresh my inner resources, I would go home to the reservation, or seek out other Indian people, or go to a pow-wow and dance. Going to a pow-wow is very much like going home: Once you arrive, there's no need to explain yourself as a tribal person. Everyone already knows and accepts your tribal heritage and cultural ways.[70]

Pow-wow entertainments generally have a variety of dances, drummers, and singers. Local indigenous vendors have booths selling traditional items ranging from food to jewelry, literature, art, and blankets.

Challenges for TCUs

Funding

The earliest TCUs are over 50 years old now, but TCUs have only been recognized as land-grant universities for the past 30 years. Even with the funding that goes along with that recognition as well as the current administration's many programs and COVID pandemic legislative bills supporting TCUs, most TCUs have had to learn how to do more with less.[71] Most TCUs do not receive state funding or have endowments they can draw on when they need to update outdated facilities. Federal funding is the main source of support outside of tuition and grant funds.[72] Because of this funding structure, TCUs have few options for increasing revenue streams. Federal funding often depends on congressional advocacy and the awareness, interest, and goodwill of the administration. TCUs cannot raise tuition without losing students, and sustaining funding via grants is labor-intensive work.[73]

Related to funding shortfalls is the issue of low faculty salaries.[74] A 2004 survey found that faculty at TCUs earn far less than their peers at other types of institutions. However, these faculty tended to be new to the job market; they tended to have fewer educational credentials than their peers; and they tended to be more satisfied with their job than their peers.[75] A 2013 research study found that TCU faculty often teach heavy loads each term and many also hold full-time professional positions at their institution.[76] While the dedication of these faculty is laudable, if TCUs were funded at the level of other land-grant institutions, they would have more resources with which to support faculty.

Generational Trauma

Generational trauma for Native Americans dates back a long way, from early settlers forcibly removing tribes from their lands to the U.S. government implementing federal boarding schools in an effort to assimilate Native American culture. The trauma experienced by elders has been generationally passed down, causing current native students to intake education on high alert. In a 2021 briefing, President Joe Biden stated: "Although these policies have ended, their effects and resulting trauma reverberate in Native American communities even today, creating specific challenges that merit Federal attention and response."[77] Research has found that "Individuals suffering from generational trauma could express low self-esteem, depression, substance misuse, and high rates of suicide."[78]

In many Native organizations, including AIHEC, formal meetings start with prayers in the Native language to establish the sense of community and responsibility and a supportive working environment. The language is still used as a tool to maintain connections with the community, ancestors, and the spiritual realm. At Sinte Gleska University, for one example, the academic community is invited to a ceremony to begin a new school year. Participation in ceremonies strengthens the sense of community and helps students re-establish connections to Lakota culture and identity.[79]

Because the assimilation of language is the dominant driver in Native American trauma, through support and collaboration with AIHEC, TCUs focus heavily on preservation and connection to local languages, achieved through indigenous language programs and communal events.

Low Graduation Rates

A study conducted by Data USA found that in 2021 TCUs had a retention rate of 50 percent in comparison to baccalaureate/associate colleges, which had a retention rate of 59 percent. However, this 9 percent difference was exacerbated by the enrollment amount of baccalaureate/associate colleges. The study also found that only 47.5 percent of TCU students are registered full-time in comparison to baccalaureate colleges, which had a full-time enrollment of 80 percent. This could be due to the large-scale enrollment of female students that are also single heads of household.[80] Lastly, the study found that TCUs had a graduation rate of only 20.9 percent.[81] Factors related to retention include academic preparedness, campus climate, commitment to educational goals and institutions, social and academic integration, and financial aid.[82] Furthermore, Native American students do not leave high school prepared enough for college due to a plethora of reasons, ranging from lack of infrastructure, lack of family support, uncaring teachers, irrelevant curriculum, and more.[83]

In order to help Native students form positive, mature identities and to reduce the number of Native dropouts large schools need to be restructured to allow teachers to

get to know and interact with their students, caring teachers (especially Native teachers) need to be recruited who will spend the time and effort to learn from as well as teach their students, these caring teachers need to use active teaching strategies with their students to keep their students motivated, Native curriculum needs to be developed and used in Native schools to reduce cultural discontinuity, testing needs to be used in schools to help students learn rather than to track them into non-academic programs, and parents need to have the power to demand schools give their children an education that will strengthen Native families rather than separate Native children from their parents."[84]

TCU students generally come underprepared for higher education; they lack confidence in their capabilities inside the classroom. "Tribal colleges and organizations such as the American Indian Science and Engineering Society visit high schools and demonstrate to students that American Indians could be successful in technological society and at the same time retain tribal cultures."[85]

Collaboration Barriers

Although collaboration efforts are vital for TCU success, there are still barriers keeping TCUs from collaborating with special interest groups. "Institutions that initiate partnerships with TCUs motivated by self-interest only perpetuate the lack of trust undermining the benefits of genuine collaborations and underscore why many TCU leaders maintain a cautious collaborator persona when it comes to collaborations involving funding."[86] Barriers hindering collaboration with mainstream universities include:[87]

- self-interest of the mainstream institution, which may be using collaboration with a TCU as a means to secure grant funding it otherwise would not have access to;

- mainstream institutions not delivering on the benefits or deliverables of a collaboration;

- mainstream institutions duplicating TCU programs and not approving transfer credits for courses of similar content;

- mainstream institutions' perception that TCUs are not as academically rigorous or as high in quality as non-tribal institutions;

- researchers at mainstream institutions conducting studies on or with native populations as a means only to advance their careers.

Despite these challenges, TCUs are increasing enrollment numbers and expanding campus facilities. Not only is the AI/AN population growing but so is the TCU population. What began as one tribal college in 1968 grew in 1973 to a coalition of six tribal colleges that formed the AIHEC, and expanded again in 1994 through the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 to 26 colleges. Today there are 37 TCUs in the United States.[88]

Digital Learning at TCUs

Digital learning is the use of technology to enable pedagogical practices and strategies in teaching and learning. It includes a broad range of tools to engage and assess students across all learning modalities, including face-to-face, blended, and online learning environments. Equitable digital learning takes an anti-deficit approach to teaching and learning, course design, and classroom climate. It prioritizes a sense of belonging in the class, in the discipline, and in the field for students historically excluded from these spaces. Equitable digital learning designs courses for inclusion, access, and success and utilizes teaching and assessment strategies that benefit racially minoritized and poverty-affected students. This section of the profile will explore the unique opportunities and challenges presented by digital learning at TCUs, while highlighting innovative ways TCUs are utilizing digital learning for preservation and revitalization.

Digital Learning Opportunities at TCUs

Digital platforms and tools can be used to create language learning resources, document cultural traditions, and connect students with elders and tribal culture bearers. Below are just a few of the many ways digital learning is supporting the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages.

In 2023, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published *Digital Initiatives for Indigenous Languages*,[89] a digital and openly licensed toolkit to demonstrate how the "internet and other digital tools can be utilized to conserve, revive, and promote Indigenous languages, as well as other marginalized or minority languages."[90] The toolkit lists several key approaches to preserving and revitalizing indigenous languages, including,

> **facilitating digital communication in Indigenous languages, multiplying Indigenous language content online, normalizing the use of Indigenous languages online, educating in and teaching Indigenous languages online, reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous languages and knowledges digitally, and imagining and creating new digital media in Indigenous languages.[91]**

Ogoki Learning has developed 300+ Native American language apps that promote language learning through flashcards, storytelling, dictionaries, games, and quizzes. Company founder Darrick Baxter originally developed the app to teach his daughter enough Ojibwe to speak to her grandmother. Today, Baxter works with language preservation scholars at tribal colleges across Canada and the U.S. to develop apps that support language preservation and language learning.[92]

Currently, AIHEC is in the final year of the Reclaiming the Words of Our People Initiative, which is "a 3-year strategic plan for capacity-building to teach and maintain American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) languages at our nation's Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)."[93] Among the resources highlighted by the Initiative are America's Languages Portal, which partners with TCUs and Native American–serving institutions to provide free courses on native language and culture, and 7000 Languages, an organization that creates "free online language-learning courses in partnership with Indigenous, minority, and refugee communities."[94]

Digital learning can also increase access to education for students who live in rural and remote areas or on reservations so geographically large that daily travel to the college is a hardship. According to the American Indian College Fund, all 35 TCUs have at least one campus online, meaning that students can access information and many services, and apply and register for classes online. However, our research found that while nearly all of them offered online courses, only five offer degrees fully online and only three offer certificates online.[95]

Diné College is located in south central Tsaile, in Apache County, Arizona. The two-year college serves the Navajo Nation, which covers over 27,400 square miles of land in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. In order to ensure access to all students living in the Navajo Nation, Diné established five campuses and two micro campuses. Micro campuses are single buildings in remote sites that house a classroom, an administrative office, and a study space that are all connected to local internet networks so that students can connect to the main campus.[96] The concept of the micro campus has expanded to schools like the University of Arizona, which opened a micro campus 15 miles from the main campus with a specific mission to serve the Pascua Yaqui Tribe.[97] The building contains a classroom, two study spaces, and a computer lab open to all tribal members.[98]

The National Science Foundation (NSF) established the Tribal Colleges and Universities Program (TCUP) to promote and support STEM learning and research at federally recognized TCUs, Alaska Native-serving institutions, and Native Hawaiian-serving institutions. Within the TCUP, the Cyberinfrastructure Health, Assistance, and Improvements (CHAI) strand allows institutions to upgrade cyberinfrastructure needed for virtual instruction, advanced computing, and data science needed for STEM learning and research.[99]

Another NSF program, Campus Cyberinfrastructure, funds "projects that help overcome disparities in cyber-connectivity associated with geographic location, … thereby advancing the geography of innovation and enabling populations based in these locales to become more nationally competitive in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) research and education."[100] The University of Montana is using a Campus Cyberinfrastructure grant in partnership with AIHEC and leaders at Montana's seven tribal colleges to assess the cyberinfrastructure requirements needed to improve STEM programs and research at Montana's TCUs.[101]

AIHEC's Cyberinfrastructure (CI) Team has a broader program to improve the cyberinfrastructure at its 37 member colleges by leveraging NSF funding in a variety of grant programs. According to the CI Team,

> **Each TCU has participated in at least two initiatives with an average of five initiatives per Tribal College. During this time, many TCUs achieved significant progress enhancing their campus IT departments and capabilities, began to reduce the barriers, expanded and adopted cyberinfrastructure technologies into their campus environment, and laid the foundation for better alignment with their academic and research departments.[102]**

In his 2021 article "Decolonizing the Digital Landscape: The Role of Technology in Indigenous Language Revitalization," Paul J. Meighan outlines several ways technology has been used to complement and enhance existing indigenous teaching methods such as storytelling, place-based learning, experiential learning, and ritual. He writes that in the early period of digital technologies, through 2005, technology assisted communication and the dissemination of information. Indigenous peoples used digital technologies to preserve language and culture

through recording interviews with elders, sacred dances and other rituals, and archiving language, stories, and maps. Later periods in digital technologies have allowed for more social interaction among tribal members and between tribes, as well as giving tribes a presence on the web and in popular web resources such as Wikipedia. The most recent period of digital technologies has seen indigenous peoples becoming content creators developing learning and gaming apps, film and television programming, digital archives, and platforms for activists, storytellers, scholars, traditional craftspersons, and entrepreneurs.[103]

Learning technology can be used to preserve and revitalize native arts. In her 2022 *Tribal College* article "Born of Necessity: Native Arts Learning Through Distance Education," Bridget Skenadore highlighted how TCUs used technology to maintain classes on native arts and culture during the COVID-19 pandemic. With grants provided by the American Indian College Fund's Native Arts Distance Learning program, seven TCUs were able to invest in Zoom and video recording equipment as well as purchasing essential materials to connect students with master artists; to create video tutorials to teach traditional arts; and to record theater, dance, and music performances. Skenadore noted how virtual workshops had the added benefit of connecting people with a shared interest in traditional art forms: "Workshop participants included students, local community members, and tribal members living off the reservation—some even several states away."[104] In this way, online platforms were used to foster community engagement and share cultural events.

In spring of 2023, Meta launched the Spark Indigenous Augmented Reality Creator Accelerator in partnership with Slow Studies Creative.[105] The program, Spark Indigenous, trains creators to use Meta Spark Studio so they can develop virtual reality (VR) content that provides students with immersive experiences with native arts and storytelling.[106] While the VR content will benefit all tribal members by preserving native culture and providing experiences of it for new learners, it can also be used in college courses to teach indigenous history, indigenous land management, and indigenous foodways.

While this next project is being developed for elementary students, it has great potential for TCU students. Jared Ten Brink, a doctoral student in education at the University of Michigan and a member of the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi, documented the traditional practices of harvesting and processing wild rice and maple syrup using VR technology.[107] What drove him to choose VR over traditional video documentation is that he wanted students to be able to engage with the ecosystems, with the tools, and with each other. When asked in an interview with Jeff Young, host of the EdSurge podcast, whether it was ironic that he was using modern technology to teach ancient culture, Ten Brink responded, "Native people have utilized technology in a lot of different ways for a long time, and we're not stuck in one era or one past."[108]

TCUs and their support organizations use technology to support tribal education and career development. The American Indian College Fund uses its digital platform to help native students prepare for college. Its College Access and Success page hosts resource guides and videos as well as information about scholarships, money management, and career exploration. Both the American Indian College Fund and AIHEC provide links to all 35 accredited TCUs so that students can connect directly with them. In addition to the colleges themselves, AIHEC and the American Indian College Fund provide platforms for students to share their stories, perspectives, and knowledge. AIHEC celebrates students on its What's Happening at Our TCUs page and through its support for *Tribal College Journal*, which publishes TCJ Student, a digital platform for "student art, writing, and expression."[109]

Challenges of Digital Learning at TCUs

Significant disparities in access to technology and internet connectivity on many reservations create significant barriers to digital learning for students at TCUs. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), "In 2020, 18% of people living on tribal lands couldn't access broadband service, compared to 4% of people in non-tribal areas."[110] Expanding broadband services to rural areas is expensive and, despite government and state grants to support installation and maintenance of networks, many tribes have had little success with corporate partners. For some tribes, the solution is to take over or develop their own broadband expansion projects.[111]

Limitations in resources and infrastructure are hindering widespread adoption and maintenance of digital learning initiatives at many TCUs. These funding issues also impact faculty development and support. There is a need for training and resources for TCU faculty to effectively integrate technology into their teaching while maintaining the unique strengths of their institutions. However, TCU educators often wear many hats and are already stretched thin in terms of their time and capacity. A concern for all institutes of education that TCUs share when adopting digital learning platforms is protecting student data and ensuring that cybersecurity measures are in place for online platforms and resources. Finally, digital learning materials and platforms need to be designed in culturally responsive ways that align with indigenous pedagogical approaches and worldviews.

Conclusion

TCUs stand as beacons of hope, exemplifying the resilience and determination of Native American communities to define their educational pathways and sustain their sovereign rights. These institutions not only provide culturally relevant education but also serve as important centers for community engagement and environmental stewardship.

Through the lens of digital learning opportunities and challenges, it is evident that TCUs are pioneering innovative approaches that honor traditional knowledge systems while embracing modern technologies. This dual commitment ensures that indigenous students can access quality education without compromising their cultural identity. Digital learning at TCUs has the potential to expand educational reach, facilitate the sharing of indigenous knowledge globally, and empower students with the skills necessary to navigate and influence an increasingly interconnected world.

The journey of TCUs, from their founding moments to their current achievements, is a testament to the power of education as a tool for cultural preservation and societal revitalization. Moving forward, it is imperative that we continue to support and learn from these institutions as they navigate the opportunities and challenges ahead, with the ultimate goal of honoring the past, enriching the present, and envisioning a sustainable future for all.

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