

Tribal Colleges: Uniquely Indian Educational Institutions

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Societal Conditions that Helped Create Tribal Colleges

Economically and educationally, the beginning of the twentieth century was bleak for Native Americans. Native Americans were completely controlled by the government through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The Boarding Schools / Mission Schools were at their peak. All types of abuses were occurring at the federal Indian boarding schools, as well as private and mission schools (Meriam et al., 1928). Sweeping changes were advocated "... in the harsh disciplinary approach which took Indian children from their homes and imposed upon them a living environment and education, judged by some, to be substandard" (Stein, 1988, p. 33). Native Americans weren't allowed to vote in local, state, or national elections until 1921, and they could not start a business, sell or buy land, or enroll their children in school without the BIA's approval (Reyhner & Eder, 1989).

For years the living conditions on reservations were extremely bad. In 1887, Congress had passed the General Allotment Act in 1887, which allocated a certain amount of land to Native American individuals. The land not allocated to Native Americans was sold to settlers. The reservation shrank and living conditions became even worse.

In 1934, the Reorganization Act was passed to halt the sale of Native American land. The Act also established an elected government that would enable the tribe to conduct business. However, poverty continued unabated, due to the fact that the land was so divided. It was impossible to make a living by farming or cattle ranching.

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Throughout the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's the primary concern of the Native Americans residing on reservations was to earn a living. A survey conducted in 1949, on one North Dakota Indian Reservation, showed an annual income of \$949 (Schneider, 1990).

After the Veterans Readjustment Act, however, changes in Indian Country began, albeit slowly, when Native American men and women returned from World War II. Exposed to the world away from the reservation, these veterans wanted a higher standard of living, for themselves and their families, and many of them took advantage of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, also known as the GI bill, to attend college (Szasz, 1999).

The Civil Rights movements of the 1950's and 1960's followed the GI Bill. As a result of these things, more and more Indian leaders desired to control their own destiny. This new attitude of self-determination eventually led to the founding of tribal colleges in the sixties (Stein, 1988, p. 33).

Community colleges also played a key role in the founding of tribal colleges. Towards the end of the sixties, at least one new community college opened its door every week somewhere in the United States.

“By 1968, there were 739 public community colleges, and in 1978, there were 1,047 such institutions, an increase of about 42%” (Stein, 1988, p. 38). Though their missions and purposes were unlike tribal colleges, community colleges were more like tribal colleges than they were different. Community colleges served a rural population, offered vocational education and responded to community, rather than national needs (Stein, 1988, p. 38). Tribal colleges also served a rural population and responded to the local needs of the community and the needs of Indians on the reservations. In fact, tribal leaders deliberately chose the community college model of higher education when forming their tribal colleges because the missions and purpose of community colleges better fit the needs for higher education on the reservations than any other higher education institution (Ramirez-Shkwegnaabi, 1987).

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Tribally Controlled Community Colleges

What makes tribal colleges unique? “Tribal Colleges are different than mainstream community college in their cultural identities, which are reflected in virtually every aspect of college life” (AIHEC, 1998, p. E.1). In reaction to their history, American Indian leaders in the 1960s, began rethinking higher education for Indian tribes. “These leaders recognized the growing importance of post-secondary education, and became convinced that it could strengthen reservations and tribal culture without assimilation” (Boyer, 1997).

Currently, there are 34 tribal colleges in the United States. The tribally controlled institutions are chartered by one or more tribes and are locally managed, while the federally chartered institutions are governed by national boards. Federally chartered institutions are commonly known as BIA colleges; these colleges are located off the reservation, usually near or within a major city. Tribally controlled colleges have a unique relationship with reservation communities, as they are located either on the reservation or within close proximity to the reservation. This allows tribal members easy access to the services of the colleges.

The first tribally controlled college, Navajo Community College, was founded in 1968 to meet the needs of its tribal members. “It was the first college established by Indians for Indians. It set a precedent for later Indian controlled community colleges” (Opelt, 1990, p. 33). Marjane Ambler, editor for the Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education, published by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, relates this story in the 2002 Winter edition of the journal:

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U.S. Rep. Wayne Aspinall (D-CO) was one of the most powerful men in Congress as chairman of the House Interior Committee in the 1960s and 1970s. Never considered a friend to American Indian causes, Aspinall was cajoled by Ruth Roessel (Navajo) to attend the groundbreaking ceremony for Navajo Community College in Tsaile, AZ, the nation's first tribal college and thus the first to seek federal funding.

At the groundbreaking, Aspinall and several others held onto the "gish," the traditional digging stick. During the lengthy ceremony, Bob Roessel grew increasingly alarmed. The day was hot; the Congressman was elderly; and Aspinall was stooped over, his hands below the others on the gish. At the end, he released the stick and slowly stood up, calling Bob Roessel to his side. "I have been to mosques; I have been to synagogues; I've been to churches all over the world. But I felt God when I felt that stick. You will get your college," he said. True to his word, Aspinall shouted down congressional and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) opponents, and the Navajo Community College Act of 1971 became law. (p. 6)

Once the Navajo Nation created the first tribally controlled college, now called Diné College, other tribal colleges quickly followed in California, North Dakota, and South Dakota. In 1972, representatives from all existing Indian post-secondary institutions met in Washington D.C., and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) was founded. The colleges soon found out that they had several characteristics in common:

1. They were located on or near Indian Reservations, which were isolated geographically and culturally.
2. The institutions had Indian boards of regents or directors and a majority of their administration and faculty was Indian.
3. Indian student bodies were small, ranging in number from 75 to 800.
4. Student bodies and the Indian communities surrounding institutions were from the lowest income areas in the United States.
5. They were chartered by one or more tribes, but maintain their distance from tribal governments.

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6. The institutions had open admissions policies; and
7. They began as two-year institutions.

The founding of the AIHEC was followed by a second and third wave of tribal colleges founded across the country in Nebraska, Washington, Montana Alaska, Michigan, Wisconsin and Arizona.

Why are Tribal Colleges Unique?

This researcher found many answers to this question. One answer was in a booklet titled, *Tribal Colleges: An Introduction*, written and published by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium.

“Tribal colleges were created over the last 30 years in response to the higher education needs of American Indians, and generally serve a geographically isolated population that have no other means of accessing education beyond high school level” (AIHEC, 1999, p. A-1).

The majority of tribal colleges were founded on reservations that have high unemployment, low educational attainment of their students, and a low level of high school graduation. Other difficulties facing Native Americans were high suicide rates, high death rates due to alcohol-related causes, and cultural and language differences, which made it difficult for Native Americans to succeed in higher education.

The funding and counting of Native American students at tribal colleges is different from the systems states use to fund their colleges and universities. In addition, a special enrollment measure is used by the Bureau of Indian Affairs for tribal colleges; in particular, an Indian Student Count (ISC) measures the number of FTE American Indian/Alaskan Native students enrolled in a Tribal College according to a specific

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formula, for the purposes of distributing funds under the Tribally Controlled College or University Act.

Tribal Colleges Today

When compared to the amount of research conducted on mainstream institutions, the research available on tribal college is small and inadequate. The number of tribal colleges is small compared to the number of mainstream institutions. It may be that only a few people outside of Indian Country are interested in Tribal Colleges. While there may not be a large-scale program of empirical research conducted on tribal colleges; there has been a number of localized studies. The consistency of the positive results reported in these studies is exceptional in the field of education, where research variance is often the norm.

As mentioned earlier, tribal colleges share several common characteristics; however, each tribal college has its own unique purpose, which is to educate its tribal members and promote and restore its tribal culture. Because each tribe serves a different tribe, or band within a tribe, the language, customs, and culture of each tribal college are different. In addition, tribal colleges are in various stages of development (AIHEC, 1998). This makes it difficult to make an across the board statement about tribal colleges. However, there is one organization; AIHEC, mentioned earlier in this study, that serves all tribal colleges. By studying AIHEC's mission and purpose, a researcher is in essence studying the tribal colleges.

AIHEC - The American Indian Higher Education Consortium

Part of AIHEC's mission is: (a) to assist tribal colleges in maintaining high academic standards, (b) to develop an accreditation body for tribal colleges, (c) to reach

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out to national organizations and promote and advocate for tribal colleges, and (d) to provide tribal colleges with technical assistance (Robbins, 2002).

AIHEC's staff and member institutions work very hard towards its objectives to maintain the quality of American Indian education, support the development of new tribal colleges; promote and assist in the development of new legislation to support tribal colleges; and to encourage greater participation, by American Indians, in the development of higher education policy. Toward this end, AIHEC holds four meetings each year. Tribal college presidents, board members, administrators, and students attend the meetings. They discuss a variety of issues ranging from federal funding to accreditation. Many government and private agencies attend these meetings as well, either at AIHEC's request or to seek input from the tribal colleges on a variety of issues. The meetings always start with a prayer and an introduction of guests. In true "Indian style," the meetings often drag on until late in the evening and often no consensus is reached on the issues discussed (researcher's personal observations).

One of AIHEC's most important achievements was Executive Order No. 13270. This legislation reaffirms the importance of tribal colleges to the development of Native Americans, both socially and economically. The Order directs all federal departments and agencies to increase their support of tribal colleges. It is a reminder that Tribal Colleges are a part of the entire federal government and that education of American Indians is part of a national mandate, one that all policymakers have a responsibility to fulfill (AIHEC, 2004a).

AIHEC's (2004a) legislative priorities, during the second session of the 107th Congress – Fiscal Year 2003, focused on the following:

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1. Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act (P.L. 95-471).
This funds institutional operations at 25 colleges.
2. Equity in Educational Land Grant Status Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-382). This funds infrastructure and facilities.
3. Higher Education Act, Title III, Part A, Section 316, “Strengthening Tribal Colleges” (P.L. 105-244). These funds are used for basic enhancements in infrastructure, faculty, and curriculum. AIHEC would like \$5 million of these funds to be awarded to Tribal Colleges and Universities for Basic and Adult Education, to address the tremendous need for education in Indian Country.
4. Infrastructure Needs. AIHEC is pushing to expand funding for facilities maintenance issues and to help build new facilities at tribal colleges. AIHEC is looking for funding from the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Education, and HUD to support these facilities needs. In addition, AIHEC is asking Congress to support technology programs for tribal colleges within NASA, NSF, and other Federal agencies to counteract the void of current technology that exists in Indian country.
5. Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities (Executive Order No. 13021). “promotes tribal college participation in programs throughout the Federal Government and elevates our profile as accredited higher education institutions” (AIHEC, 2004a).

Are tribal colleges really as successful as their proponents say they are? Do they really perform the “miracles?” The most accurate way to answer these questions is to

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examine information regarding student performance and accomplishment, and see if the colleges are attracting partners such as federal agencies to help them accomplish their mission.

In May 2000, AIHEC published results of a survey titled, *Creating Role Models for Change: A Survey of Tribal College Graduates*. The purpose of this survey was to seek answers to the following questions: Have the Tribal Colleges prepared students for future employment and education? Are Tribal College alumni employed in meaningful jobs? Are graduates continuing on for more advanced degrees? Are graduates satisfied with the education they received at the Tribal Colleges? Students from 18 Tribal Colleges participated in the survey. The survey's summary and conclusion was:

The findings strongly suggest that the education students receive has had a positive effect on their lives. Although further research is necessary to determine cause and effect, Tribal College graduates seem to be employed at higher rates than might have been expected had they not achieved their degrees or certificates. The majority of the graduates reported having full- or part-time jobs, despite the difficult circumstances that exist in most reservation communities. Many Tribal College graduates were able to obtain jobs that serve their local communities, thereby positively affecting both the students and the overall American Indian population. In addition, the majority of Tribal College graduates said their jobs were related to their college majors, and felt that the coursework taken through those majors was good preparation for their jobs.

“During my years attending a Tribal College, I received a lot more attention and help than I would have if I'd attended a university. I feel that the Tribal College has given me the experience and ability to be a successful student.” — graduate, Dull Knife Memorial College. (AIHEC, 2000, p. 16).

In May 2001, AIHEC published a report titled, *Building Strong Communities: Tribal Colleges as Engaged Institutions*. The report highlighted five areas the tribal colleges are engaged in; preschool and elementary and secondary education, health and nutrition activities, faculty role modes, agriculture and natural resource development, and

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language preservation and development. The report details challenges faced by Native American Communities in these five areas, and the various way tribal colleges are assisting them. The educational programs offered by Tribal Colleges in assisting these areas target all stages of youth development and improvement, not only in the academic areas, but also physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the youth. Examples include: providing improved prenatal and parent education through Even Start, Head Start and Early Head Start; direct linkages with tribal elementary and secondary schools in the areas of math, science, technology; bringing TRIO programs to the reservation and preparing teachers and teacher aides (AIHEC, 2001).

In the 2002 winter edition of the Tribal College Journal, Dr. Gerald Gipp, Executive Director of AIHEC writes:

The AIHEC colleges are a success story, growing to 33 colleges and universities in 12 states with more developing throughout the country. They educate some 30,000 full- and part-time students from over 250 federally recognized tribes, yet they are the most under-funded institutions of higher education in America. Despite this struggle, they have never lost sight of their tribal cultures and its appropriate role in the learning environment (Gipp, 2002, p. 3).

The Tribal College Journal in an edition on the 30th Anniversary of AIHEC, asked various people who had been involved in the tribal college movement to look back 30 years, and to look forward 30 years and to share their predictions for tribal colleges and to take a hard look at what remains to be accomplished.

Boyer (2002) recalled that relatively few people believed that tribal colleges would succeed or even survive.

“My God, Mr. Chairman you don’t mean to think that you Navajos can create a college?” said a prominent businessman when he heard about the proposed founding of

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Navajo Community College. Bob Roessel, the first president of Navajo Community College, heard the comment and recalled the laughter as the man stood and left the public meeting. Boyer (2002) went on to point out that today the colleges are stronger financially, politically and educationally because they have jumped through the hoops required to satisfy both their own constituents and mainstream society.

Here are a few of the responses when people prominent in Indian higher education, were asked the question, where will we be in 30 more years?

The tribal colleges do more for less than anybody else in the country. In other words, they provide more education and opportunities at less cost to the federal government than any other educational institutions you can find anywhere. They did not have standing 20 years ago, but they have it now. Their standing has been earned, and I think it is respected. My vision for the tribal colleges has two parts: first that they get equal funding with all other colleges when it comes to the per student allocation and secondly that they become even more accessible and have even better facilities than the ones they have now. They are working under very difficult circumstances, but they are doing extraordinary things in large measure because of their determination, and we have got to help them. (Daschle, 2002, p. 40)

We need to send our students into the communities to experience the things that are happening there. Then, we need to bring them back to the classrooms to dialogue about those issues. We need for our students to see how important it is to make the right decisions when a tribal member is given a position of authority and leadership. We need for all of our students to aspire to be leaders and to be the best leaders that they can possibly be. Enough of this tribal politics as the norm. Let's make good leadership the norm! We have the future of our tribes in our hands. Our survival might depend upon it! (Davis, 2002, p. 41)

My dream for the year 2032 is that every two-year tribal college has become a four-year school, and they are offering graduate level courses. I pray that all of our current four-year schools have now become Ph.D. granting institutions, and all have Centers of Excellence in Tribal Studies where distinguished tribal scholars go to do tribal research. I hope I am a retired emeritus from one of the schools, and I am sitting in the library still doing research on quantum mechanics and spirits. (Williams, 2002, p. 41)

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The tribal colleges early years were difficult, as they struggled with funding, inadequate facilities, and tribal politics. But, they were successful in the area it counted, retaining and graduating students. In the early nineties, Gerald “Carty” Monette began writing his dissertation, Mr. Monette was studying a barely twenty year old college, Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC). He concluded that TMCC was meeting its purpose by providing access to higher education, and the college had met its academic mission because tribal members were increasing their appreciation and understanding of the values of higher education. Monette’s “Transfer Conclusions” included a desire to have TMCC become a four-year institution. Many students had already successfully transferred to a four-year college and were well prepared; all graduates placed a high value on a four-year degree; and inadequate facilities and equipment did not reduce the quality of education. A significant finding was that the growth of business and industry on the Turtle Mountain reservation can be traced to the academics and vocational offering of the college (Monette, 1995).

Tribal Colleges are making inroads in disciplines traditionally avoided by Native Americans, math and science. Marjane Amber, reported on several tribal colleges that have created educational models in the math and science disciplines. At Northwest Indian College students can earn a two-year degree in Tribal Environmental and Natural Resources Management from a program funded by the National Science Foundation. At Dine College - Shiprock Campus, New Mexico, Dr. Steve Semken and Frank Morgan have integrated Navajo pedagogy into an introductory physical geology course for Navajo students, incorporating the Navajo model into an earth systems curriculum. Salish Kootenai College, Pablo, Montana, “is integrating environmental sciences across

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the curriculum” (Ambler, 1998). These programs epitomize what tribal colleges are all about, meeting not only standard requirements but also the ability to develop an approach research and management that ‘honors each tribe’s cultural values’.”