

# CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

## Native American Student Success: The Effect of Tribal Colleges and Universities on Native American Student Retention

by Rachel Bryan



Rachel Bryan is a second-year M.A. student at the University of Michigan studying Higher Education with a concentration in Diversity and Social Justice. Currently, she is a Graduate Intern for the Office of Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs, where she coordinates programming and social media campaigns for Native American Heritage Month, in addition to working with students and staff to run the 46th Annual Dance for Mother Earth Powwow. She also works at the Office of the Provost as the Engaged Michigan Program Assistant. Rachel received her B.A. in Linguistics and a minor in Gender and Health from the University of Michigan as well.

Readers with any questions or comments should contact Rachel Bryan at [rachbry@umich.edu](mailto:rachbry@umich.edu)

### Executive Summary

*Native Americans have the lowest educational attainment of any racial or ethnic group (Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, n.d.). Fortunately, by attending a Tribal College or University (TCU) before attending a mainstream four-year institution, Native American students are four times more likely to receive their bachelor's degree than their peers that attend a mainstream four-year institution immediately after high school (Boyer, 1997a). This statistic poses the following questions: (1) How are mainstream institutions failing their Native American students? (2) How are TCUs supporting their Native American student population and preparing them to continue pursuing their education, should they choose to do so?*

*Mainstream four-year institutions don't often recognize the post-traditional nature of the Native American student population. Additionally, the infrastructure of mainstream four-year institutions is based on a Eurocentric model that, by nature, does not align with Native American culture and values. In contrast, TCUs understand the needs and values of their student population and provide resources specific to those needs. One of the ways in which mainstream four-year institutions can support their Native American student population is by establishing partnerships with TCUs, as well as providing resources that are specific to the demographics and experiences of the Native American student population. By increasing partnerships and resource availability, Native American educational attainment and well-being will increase over time.*

### Introduction

In the United States, Native Americans have the lowest educational attainment of any racial or ethnic group (Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, n.d.). Specifically, their high school dropout rate is double the national average, and their high school graduation rate is 49.3%, which is much lower than the rate for White students at 76.2% (Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, n.d.). Additionally, only 13.3% of Native Americans have bachelor's degrees, compared to almost 25% of the general population (Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, n.d.). Fortunately, research shows that Native American students who attend a four-year mainstream institution after attending a Tribal College or University (TCU) are at an advantage and increase their chances of receiving their bachelor's degree (Boyer, 1997a; Makomenaw, 2010; Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005; Vandever, 2017). In fact, 38% of Native American students receive a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution after attending a TCU (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005), making them four times more likely to receive their bachelor's degree than their Native American peers that enroll in a mainstream four-year institution immediately after high school (Boyer, 1997a).

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This research brief will discuss how and why TCU enrollment improves Native American student retention in mainstream four-year institutions, as well as explore existing partnerships between TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions that could help to improve the transfer process, and overall, Native American student persistence. First, I will provide a brief history of Tribal Colleges and Universities. Then, I will compare how mainstream four-year institutions and TCUs serve Native American students in order to provide a more in-depth understanding about the ways in which mainstream four-year institutions can learn from TCUs. Then, I will discuss existing partnerships between mainstream four-year institutions and TCUs, in addition to necessary considerations in establishing new partnerships. Finally, I will conclude by providing recommendations for additional ways to support the Native American student population outside of partnerships.

## History of Tribal Colleges and Universities

Europeans began to infringe on Native American education as early as the 1500s (Wright, 1998; Shotton, Low, & Waterman, 2013). In the late 1700s, colleges including Dartmouth College, the College of William and Mary, and Harvard University were allocated funds for establishing a Native American education system (Gasman, Nguyen, & Conrad, 2015). Unfortunately, as a result of that system, many Native Americans lost their lives from illness and isolation (Gasman et al., 2015; Shotton et al., 2013). In the 1800s, the federal government seized responsibility of Native American education and established boarding schools, which smothered Native American culture and led to the colonization of their land (Gasman et al., 2015; Adams, 1988; Adams, 1995; Carney, 1999; Shotton et al., 2013). These boarding schools forbid the use of tribal languages, and instead of fostering Native American educational success, the schools trained Native Americans for manual labor (Gasman et al., 2015). Moving forward to the 1900s, Native Americans were given full citizenship by the federal government, increasing funds for Native American education and decreasing Native American autonomy (Gasman et al., 2015).

Over time, Native American autonomy increased as a result of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the Indian Education Act of 1972,

and the Education Assistance Act of 1975, all of which promoted Native American self-determination and self-governance (Shotton et al., 2013). With this autonomy, many Native Americans expressed the need for the establishment of institutions dedicated to uplifting and honoring their traditions and values. Stanley Red Bird, an elder of the Lakota Tribe, stated, “The people needed a new institution to work directly with the people...one that would provide local leaders who were well educated and committed to living here and running their own institutions” (Boyer, 2002, p. 13). Empowered to serve the needs of their community, the first tribal college, Diné College, formerly Navajo Community College, was established in 1968 (Shotton et al., 2013), where elders taught courses on tribal languages, culture, and history, working to undo the damaging effects of colonization on their community (Boyer, 1997b; Stein, 2009; Gasman et al., 2015).

After witnessing the success of the first TCU, other tribes sought to create their own; however, many tribes did not have reliable sources of funding, forcing instruction to take place in “abandoned houses, trailers, old storefronts, condemned buildings, barracks, and warehouses, or any structure where students and teachers could gather for class” (Guillory & Ward, 2007, p. 124). TCU funding improved after Congress passed the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act in 1978, which “helped stabilize existing and build additional tribal colleges” (Gasman et al., 2015, p. 130; Shotton et al., 2013). As more TCUs were being established, Native American leaders were learning how to establish and run TCUs on the fly: “None of us knew what we were doing...founding a college was an unfamiliar territory” (Boyer, 2002, p. 14). Today, there are 35 tribal colleges that are spread across the nation (Penn GSE CMSI - MSI Directory, 2018) and the demand for TCUs is increasing (Boyer, 1997a).

## The Relationship between Native American Students and Mainstream Four-Year Institutions

Due to their historic relationship with Eurocentric education, some Native American families distrust mainstream four-year institutions, as they often ignore “cultural traditions, norms, and perspectives of

other racial and cultural groups” (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005, p. 52). Because these institutions represent European needs and values, such as independence and detachment (Shotton et al., 2013), Native American students and their families can see enrollment in a mainstream four-year institution as an act of disloyalty to their culture (Schmidt & Akande, 2011), which values interdependence and family. After Native American students leave their community to attend a mainstream four-year institution, they often experience isolation, hostility, and racism from both their classmates and their professors (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Lin, LaCounte, & Elder, 1998; Perry, 2002; Shotton, 2008), contributing to their negative experiences and low retention rates. In addition to their Eurocentric curriculum, mainstream four-year institutions lack faculty of Native American descent (Schmidt & Akande, 2011), which can further discourage Native American students from attending.

It is likely that the demand for TCUs is increasing because they have proven to be vital to Native American educational attainment, an area where most mainstream four-year institutions are failing. One of the possible reasons for this failure is that mainstream four-year institutions do not address the post-traditional nature of Native American students. The term *post-traditional* is used to replace *non-traditional* because the non-traditional student population actually represents the majority of the college student population and should not be referred to as an exception to the higher education system (Smith, 2013). Native American students tend to enroll in community colleges, delay their initial college enrollment, be first-generation, live with their families, and require academic remediation (Santiago, Taylor, & Calderón Galdeano, 2016). Additionally, Native Americans are more than two times more likely to live in poverty (26%) than the general population (12%), which can affect students in many ways (Villa, n.d.). For example, some Native American students may not be able to afford transportation repairs or daycare, both of which can influence Native American dropout rates from mainstream four-year institutions (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Poverty can also lead to “alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence,” all of which plague the Native American community at staggering rates (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 23; Villa, n.d.).

Finally, the learning style of mainstream four-year institutions is also Eurocentric. Much of the instruction in these institutions revolves around reading, writing, and math, whereas many Native American tribes learn through hands-on instruction and oral history. Due to differences in learning styles, when Native American students enter a mainstream four-year institution, “one third or more of their students need academic remediation” (Boyer, 1997, p. 37). Based on their experiences, Native American students can see the curriculum, instructors, and instruction of mainstream four-year institutions as “fragmented and unfamiliar” (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005, p. 52), which can have a negative effect on the students both psychologically and academically. In sum, due to their Eurocentric nature, mainstream four-year institutions are failing Native American students, as is evident in the community’s low rates of educational attainment.

## The Relationship between Native American Students and Tribal Colleges and Universities

TCUs benefit Native American students in many ways and the skills gained by TCU students can aid in their transition to a mainstream four-year institution, should they wish to continue their education. First, TCUs provide Native American students with faculty and staff mentorship, which is key in transitioning to a mainstream four-year institution. These mentors are often called “follow-through” mentors because if their mentee is interested in transferring to a mainstream four-year institution, they aid in this process and maintain contact after the transfer process is complete. In addition to their mentorship role, follow-through mentors also act as tutors and advisors for Native American students and are present in many aspects of students’ lives (Robbins, 1998).

Second, TCUs recognize the need for culturally relevant material. By incorporating Native American values, tribal languages, and tribal history (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005), their curriculum is culturally sensitive and provides Native American students with courses that meet their needs, contrasting with the curriculum of mainstream four-year institutions. Not only is their course content relevant, but it is also taught in a way that empowers students. Many TCUs use the Family Education Model, the

purpose of which is to increase Native American student retention by affirming linguistic, racial, and ethnic identities, by providing academic and familial counseling, by building a tight-knit community, and by preparing students for mainstream culture (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Perhaps most importantly, this model emphasizes that the issues surrounding Native American student retention should not be blamed on the behaviors of Native American students, but on the tension between institutional, student, and familial values (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002).

Finally, if they are interested in transferring, TCUs help Native American students adjust to the academic environment of post-secondary education before having to adjust to the social environment of a mainstream four-year institution (Makomenaw, 2010). The environment of a TCU contrasts with that of a mainstream four-year institution in many ways, including the institutional mission, the size of the institution, and the racial makeup of students, staff, and faculty (Makomenaw, 2012). In sum, through empowerment and preparation, TCUs serve to “raise a bunch of radicals with the skills to recognize and address social injustice” (Makomenaw, 2012), as stated by Cheryl Crazy Bull, president of the American Indian College Fund, and prepare TCU graduates for the transition into a mainstream four-year institution.

## Partnerships with Four-Year Institutions

As more TCU students are transferring to four-year institutions to obtain their bachelor’s degrees (Makomenaw, 2014), TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions are recognizing the importance of making the transfer process simple and effective. Therefore, they are fostering partnerships, which can be established through government agencies, foundations, or individual universities.

### **Government Agencies**

Funding provided by government agencies is one way partnerships between TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions are established. The All Nations Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (ANLSAMP), funded by the National Science Foundation, has helped to foster partnerships between 27 TCUs and 11 four-year universities housed

within 14 states (ANLSAMP, n.d.). The purpose of these partnerships is to increase the number of Native American students that successfully complete their bachelor’s degrees in STEM fields (ANLSAMP, n.d.). One of the ways they work to achieve this goal is by creating articulation agreements between TCUs and four-year institutions (Robbins, 1998). An articulation agreement guarantees that certain TCU credits and courses will transfer to the four-year institution, aiding students in their transition (Robbins, 1998). Through these partnerships, Native American students are also provided with “student stipends, conference travel assistance, and research opportunities” (ANLSAMP, n.d.).



ALLIANCE FOR MINORITY PARTICIPATION 

Another example of a partnership established via a government agency is the BRIDGES program, funded by the National Institutes of Health (Brown, 2017). The Bridging Tribal Colleges to Montana State University (BRIDGES) program partners Montana State University–Bozeman with TCUs including Little Big Horn College, Fort Peck Community College, Stone Child College, and Chief Dull Knife College to provide Native American students with a summer bridge program that aids in their transition from TCUs to the four-year institution (Brown, 2017). Similar to ANLSAMP, this program is catered to Native American students in biomedical and other health-related sciences (Brown, 2017). Students in this program receive faculty mentors, enroll in scholarship-funded summer courses, and learn about Native American campus support (Brown, 2017). BRIDGES also helps tribal college faculty with research support and professional development opportunities (Brown, 2017).

### **Foundations**

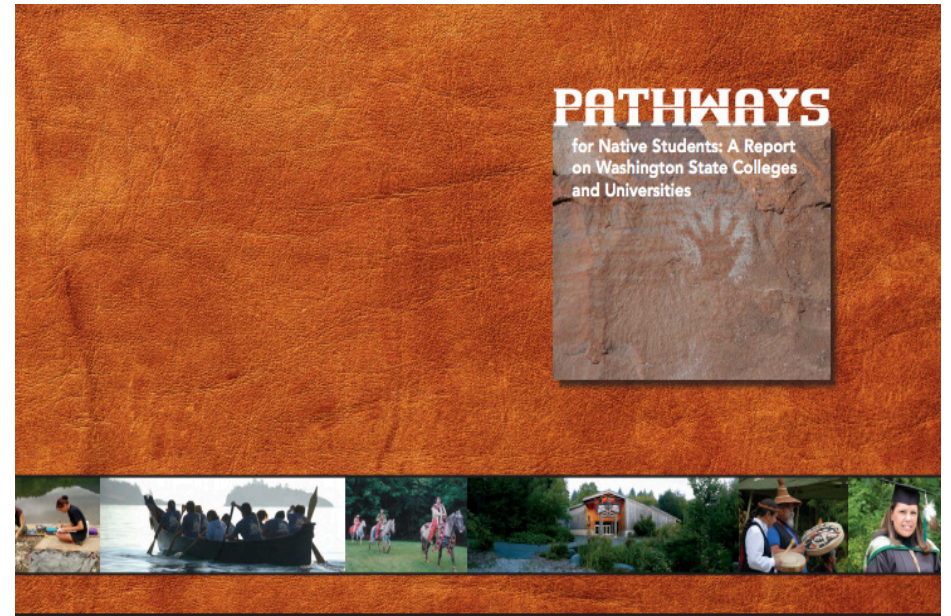
Partnerships can also be established through the use of funding granted by foundations. For example, under the Native American Higher

Education Initiative (NAHEI) funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, at least two partnerships have been established (Shotton et al., 2013). First, Sinte Gleska University (SGU) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) established a partnership with a focus on theater, launching a project titled Culture Matters: Project HOOP (Honoring Our Origins and Peoples) (Shotton et al., 2013). As a result of this project, the following was established: eight new theater courses at SGU, collaborative publications (such as *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader*), and a film on diabetes awareness with the aid of Indian Health Service (Shotton et al., 2013).



Also through the NAHEI and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a multi-institutional partnership was created between Leech Lake Tribal College (LLTC), Sinte Gleska University (SGU), and Bemidji State University (BSU). The collaborative project is titled Students Matter and focuses on “increasing enrollment and improving retention at LLTC and BSU by using distance-learning technology to allow students to complete four-year degrees at the Leech Lake campus site” (Shotton et al., 2013, p. 100). As a result of this project, the following was established: upper-level elementary courses at LLTC, access to BSU’s distance-learning degree programs, and a Native American retention counselor position at BSU (Shotton et al., 2013).

Finally, through Native American College Access and Success, which is co-funded by Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a partnership was created between Northwest Indian College, Evergreen State College, Antioch University-Seattle, Muckleshoot Tribal College (no longer a TCU), and Grays Harbor College. These institutions worked together to create a Pathways Report, explaining “Indian education efforts at the postsecondary level,” including “extensive Native education



### **Individual Four-Year Institutions**

Individual four-year institutions can also craft partnerships with TCUs. For example, Bemidji State University has created a dual-enrollment agreement with Minnesota’s TCUs, including Leech Lake Tribal College, Red Lake Nation College (no longer a TCU), White Earth Tribal and Community College, and Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017). BSU will admit students from the four TCUs as juniors after they finish 24 transferable credits (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017). Additionally, these dual-enrolled students do not have to pay the application fee for BSU and are provided with a BSU student ID that will allow them to engage in BSU student-life activities while they are still enrolled in a TCU (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017). Finally, they have access to BSU academic advisors once a semester after they achieve sophomore standing to ensure the transfer goes smoothly (“Minnesota’s Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU,” 2017).



**L to R:** Tracy Clark, president (interim), White Earth Tribal and Community College; Dan King, president, Red Lake Nation College; Dr. Faith C. Hensrud, president, Bemidji State University and Northwest Technical College; Dr. Patricia Broker, president (interim), Leech Lake Tribal College; Larry Anderson, president, Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College.

While BSU's dual-enrollment partnership with TCUs is the first of its kind, ("Minnesota's Tribal College Students Now Have Clear Transfer Pathway to BSU," 2017), individual four-year institutions have partnered with TCUs in other ways. For example, Navajo Technical University and Northern Arizona University have collaborated on several projects in the past and have recently established a memorandum of understanding (Vandever, 2017). Importantly, both parties have offered their resources to each other, which is key in establishing a partnership: "The formality of a MOU is so important for us to send a strong signal that it is important to have this partnership. I think together we can provide a great number of opportunities for our students no matter what they want to study, and we can help them fulfill their dreams" (Vandever, 2017).

***Important Considerations for Establishing Partnerships***

Before establishing partnerships between TCUs and mainstream four-year institutions, it is important to know the history of these partnerships. When TCUs were first being founded, many four-year institutions claimed TCUs weren't necessary and refused to establish partnerships because they felt they were already providing all the resources needed by Native



President Elmer J. Guy of Navajo Technical University signs an memorandum of understanding with Northern Arizona University president, Dr. Rita Cheng, in the Native American Cultural Center at Northern Arizona University.

American students (Brown, 2003). TCUs sought these partnerships to aid with funding (Stein, 1999), as well as with instructional support (Brown, 2003). Unfortunately, many mainstream four-year institutions have taken advantage of TCUs in the past through these partnerships. In a qualitative study of partnership collaborators, one TCU administrator stated, "I think most are there for good and noble reasons, but I know some are there just to get the money" (Nichols, 2001). Another asserts that four-year institutions "were always trying to take over what we were doing" (Nichols, 2001). It is important to note that many partnerships have also succeeded, such as that between Arizona State University (ASU) and Diné College, formerly Navajo Community College, in addition to the partnership between Bismark Junior College (BJC) and Sitting Bull College, formerly Standing Rock Community College (Brown, 2003). Both ASU and BJC assisted the TCUs by providing general support when needed, as well as helping with staff and faculty assignments while encouraging TCU staff to determine the qualifications necessary for these positions (Brown, 2003). In sum, it is vital that both parties in these partnerships are giving resources and receiving resources.

To aid those establishing partnerships, Nichols (2001) has created a checklist based on his qualitative data that can guide the process. This data was compiled from interviews with 18 faculty and administrators from TCUs, and 18 faculty and administrators from state universities (Nichols, 2001). First, he suggests taking the time to learn about the historical and cultural dynamics at play in these partnerships (Nichols, 2001). He also encourages healthy skepticism, as well as conversations about mission and vision (Nichols, 2001). Then, he recommends that potential partners visit each others' institutions to get a more realistic idea about what they are taking on in the partnership (Nichols, 2001). Additionally, he suggests building a network of contacts, finding mutual interests, speaking up, being patient, and being open to possibilities (Nichols, 2001). For information on what not to do when establishing a partnership, please see Nichols's (2001) chart (Table 1).

### Additional TCU Student Support

If partnerships are not possible, there are still ways that mainstream four-year institutions can improve the transfer process for TCU students who wish to continue their education. For example, institutions can provide resources that are specific to the Native American transfer experience. Salish Kootenai College created a handbook specific to this experience called *Touch the Sky: A Guide for Tribal and Community College Transfer Students* (Robbins, 1998). Importantly, it was written by Native American administrators for Native American students (Brown, 2017). Four-year institutions can provide these materials to Native American students interested in the transfer process and can gather their Native American faculty and staff to create resources specific to their institution.

Another option for mainstream four-year institutions is to increase outreach out to TCUs. For example, admissions representatives of private colleges and universities in Minnesota have reached out to Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College to talk to Native American students about the transfer process, as well as share available resources (US Federal News Service, 2008). Their resources include information about credit transfer, campus life, faculty, and financial aid (US Federal News Service, 2008). Mainstream four-year institutions can show support for TCU students in a variety of other ways, such as by conducting seminars

on the transfer process, increasing staff and faculty diversity training, and creating and supporting Native American student organizations on campus (Cunningham, 2007). They can also increase their outreach at events such as summer camps and annual pow wows (Brown, 2017).

**Table 1; State University-Tribal College Collaboration: What Does Not Work?**

Model Component	Explanation of Negative Aspects
<b>Contextual Factors</b>	Historical, cultural, economic, political, and geographic factors can slow, complicate, or de-rail collaboration
<b>Motivation</b>	Individuals or organizations who collaborate based on self-interests and without commitment to mutual goals are less likely to succeed and more likely to engender negative feelings among their partners.
<b>Individual Factors</b>	Rigid, close-minded, dishonest, impatient individuals who lack cross-cultural competence or commitment to the project are less likely to succeed.
<b>Organizational Factors</b>	Highly bureaucratized organizations, unstable organizations, and those whose cultures lack incentives/support for collaboration are less likely to succeed.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Individuals or organizations are less likely to succeed if they are not responsive to their partners' needs, do not respect their partners, do not share resources, or fail to coordinate their efforts. Collaborations in which the project's agenda is not jointly determined also are less likely to succeed.
<b>Empowerment</b>	Collaborative efforts not aimed at empowerment are less likely to succeed. Evidence of problems includes monopolization of power and decision-making. Such efforts do not inculcate a sense of efficacy, interest, and meaning among participants.

**Source:** Nichols, T. (2001). Partnerships offer promise and perils: A study of collaborations with state universities. *Tribal College: Journal Of American Indian Higher Education*, 13(3).

## Conclusion

TCUs are filling a large gap in Native American educational attainment. Understanding the limitations of mainstream four-year institutions, TCUs offer their students both an education and a community, which can help TCU graduates continue to pursue their education, should they choose to do so. One of the ways in which higher education professionals can improve this transfer process as transfer rates continue to grow (Makomenaw, 2014) is through partnership establishment. Though, it is important to consider the history of Native American education as these partnerships are being established and both parties must commit to serving each other and their student populations. Beyond partnerships, higher education professionals can support Native American students by providing them with culturally-relevant resources, as well as by expanding student outreach to intentionally include Native American communities. They can also increase philanthropy to TCUs to aid in increasing their capacity and services, and can work to establish service-learning, bridge programs, professional development, and alumni networks specific to Native American students (Shotton et al., 2013). Finally, future research should explore existing partnerships, determining who has access to these programs and if they are effective in increasing Native American student enrollment within those institutions. By supporting TCUs and the transfer process, the educational attainment of the Native American community will improve, which will lead to a decrease in Native American unemployment rates, an increase in college-educated professionals on reservations, and an improved quality of life for present and future Native Americans (Cunningham, 2007).

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