

LAYERS OF IDENTITY

RETHINKING AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE DATA COLLECTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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High-quality, disaggregated data that include race and ethnicity are essential for identifying and dismantling barriers to college access and success and improving outcomes for all students, particularly Indigenous students. American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) identity is complex and data collection has fallen short in comprehensively representing these student identities and experiences. New federal race and ethnicity standards announced in March 2024 offer some improvements to the collection of data on AI/AN populations.

METHODS OF IDENTIFYING AI/AN POPULATIONS

Self-identification and Tribal enrollment verification are the two primary methods used to identify and count AI/AN individuals in higher education. Each has benefits and limitations, and they are not mutually exclusive. When deciding which approach to use, researchers should consult with Tribal leaders and Indigenous researchers and consider the circumstances of collection methods.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Students identify their own ethnic and racial affiliation. This affirms their sense of self and accounts for those who are citizens of federally or state-recognized Tribes and those with cultural and communal affiliations.

Self-identification has the potential for misuse and inconsistency. Individuals could misrepresent their background to gain access to resources designated for AI/AN students or choose different identifications in various data collections.

TRIBAL ENROLLMENT VERIFICATION

Colleges and universities may ask students for documentation to verify Tribal citizenship. This helps colleges understand demographic trends and provide resources designated for AI/AN students.

Enrollment verification processes can exclude students who are not citizens of a Tribe but maintain strong ties to the community and can create hurdles for students who cannot access the technology needed to share documentation.

CHALLENGES WITH CATEGORIZING AI/AN STUDENTS IN POSTSECONDARY DATA COLLECTIONS

Federal postsecondary data collections adhere to the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) standards for the classification of data on race and ethnicity. Two key challenges have emerged in data collections based on OMB's previous standards:

- **Categorization of Hispanic AI/AN Students**
Under OMB's previous guidance, any AI/AN student who self-identified with Hispanic ancestry was categorized as Hispanic or Latino, regardless of Tribal affiliation and involvement.
- **Categorization of Multiracial AI/AN Students**
Students who mark more than one race, even if they are Tribal citizens, are often categorized as "Two or More Races," regardless of their Tribal citizenship or level of involvement with Tribal communities.

In March 2024, OMB published revised federal race and ethnicity standards, which remove "regardless of race" from the Hispanic or Latino definition and require federal agencies to use a single combined question for race and ethnicity.¹ When those standards are adopted, AI/AN students with Hispanic ancestry will no longer automatically be subsumed into the Hispanic or Latino category. The new federal standards also provide a modified definition of AI/AN and require federal agencies to collect detailed data for each race and ethnicity category, such as Tribal affiliation, as a default.

LIMITATIONS IN CURRENT DATA COLLECTIONS

Three key limitations in current data collections on AI/AN students undermine equity:

- **Small Counts**
AI/AN students are severely underrepresented in higher education, making up only 1 percent of the total undergraduate population in 2021–22.² This is in part due to barriers in college access (e.g., college affordability, a lack of curriculum or academic programs that incorporate Indigenous knowledge, gaps in recruitment efforts and culturally informed wraparound services) as well as an undercounting of AI/AN students because of racial and ethnic reporting standards.
- **Inconsistent Classification**
Inconsistent definitions and measurement techniques for AI/AN students across different data collections hamper efforts to derive reliable findings about policy efficacy.
- **Overgeneralized Representations**
Data aggregation across the AI/AN population masks differences in educational outcomes between hundreds of Tribes, with smaller tribes often excluded from data collections. This generalization leads to assumptions about AI/AN students and prevents policymakers from designing more effective, culturally responsive policies and interventions.



IDEAS TO IMPROVE AI/AN DATA COLLECTIONS

Researchers and policymakers should consider the following:

- **Engage AI/AN communities**

Build strong relationships with Tribes and Tribal Leaders to help make data collections inclusive and better represent the AI/AN community and include Tribal leaders and Indigenous researchers in technical advisory boards.

- **Improve research approaches for data collection, reporting, and analysis**

Incorporate Indigenous data collection practices, oversample AI/AN students, collect Tribal affiliation, and clearly document limitations. These steps can enhance data quality and promote equity and informed decision-making.

- **Collaborate with Indigenous leaders and Tribes when implementing OMB's revised race and ethnicity standards:**

The Department of Education (ED) and other federal agencies are required to develop Action Plans describing how they will bring their data collections and publications into compliance with OMB's revised standards by March 28, 2029.³ In developing its Action Plan, ED should collaborate with Indigenous leaders and researchers to establish clear guidance on how to report AI/AN data to federal postsecondary data collections, including how to best present data on multiracial AI/AN students.

Stronger data collection practices can help to advance more equitable postsecondary outcomes for AI/AN students. While new federal race and ethnicity standards offer some improvements, by partnering with Indigenous communities to improve data collections, federal and state governments and institutions can help ensure Indigenous students are well supported while pursuing a college education and building a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities.

1. Revisions to OMB's Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, 89 FR 22182. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/03/29/2024-06469/revisions-to-ombs-statistical-policy-directive-no-15-standards-for-maintaining-collecting-and>.

2. IES-NCES (website). Enrollment trends by race/ethnicity and gender, 2021-22. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/SummaryTables/report/1000?templateId=100001&years=2022&expand_by=0&tt=aggregate&instType=1&sid=20cf6e97-62b7-4c66-aff0-f128c17ea0d6.

3. Revisions to OMB's Statistical Policy Directive No. 15.

