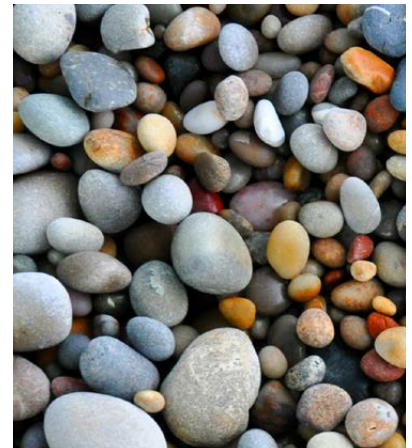


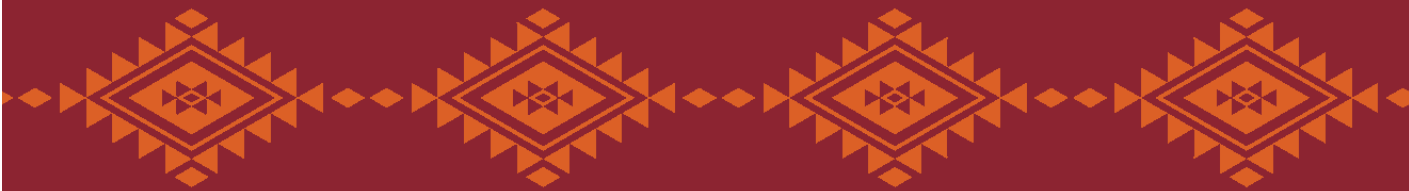


# REPORT ON NATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION SUCCESS STRATEGIES:

Strengthening policies, respecting tribal sovereignty,  
and leveraging data to address the decline in  
Native American higher education enrollment



*Findings from  
the 2024  
Native Higher  
Education  
Policy  
Convening*



“ We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who, and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined. ”

- N. SCOTT MOMADAY



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The **American Indian College Fund** (College Fund) is a Native-serving, Native-led, nonprofit organization whose mission is to support the success of Native students in higher education, build the capacity for TCUs, and increase the social and economic well-being of tribal Nations through education. The College Fund contributes to a deeper understanding of Native students' educational experiences and of TCUs through research and is expanding its role as an advocate for effective policy among influencers who can impact Indigenous education.

## BROOKINGS

The **Brookings Institution** (Brookings) is a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. Brookings's mission is to conduct in-depth, nonpartisan research to improve policy and governance at local, national, and global levels. Brookings is dedicated to finding bold, pragmatic solutions for societal challenges through open-minded inquiry, diverse perspectives, and the highest standards of scholastic rigor. Because of this, Brookings has been at the forefront of public policy for more than a century.



The **Institute for Higher Education Policy** (IHEP) is a non-partisan, nonprofit organization committed to building a more equitable and just society through higher education. Through research, advocacy, policy development, and field engagement, IHEP drives systemic change in higher education to advance equitable outcomes and generational impact for communities historically marginalized on the basis of race, ethnicity, or income.

### How to Cite

The American Indian College Fund (January 2025). *Report of Native Higher Education Success Strategies: Strengthening policies, respecting tribal sovereignty, and leveraging data to address the decline in Native American higher education enrollment.* <https://collegefund.org/nhess-report>

## Acronyms and Definition

The report uses terms such as American Indian, Alaska Native, Indigenous, tribe, and Native interchangeably. The acronym **AIAN** encompasses both American Indians and Alaska Natives.

**TCUs** stands for tribal colleges and universities located on or near a tribal homeland. TCUs are chartered and operated academic institutions that serve the unique needs of American Indian and Alaska Native people in areas operated by federally recognized Tribes or organizations.

**NASNTIs** refers to Native American-Serving Non-Tribal Institutions Program. This report uses the term for postsecondary public and private institutions with high Native American student enrollment, not tribal colleges, designated based on specific criteria to serve this population.



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# INTRODUCTION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) enrollment in post-secondary education declined by 40% between 2010 and 2021. Combined with the fact that the number of AIAN people over the age of 25 holding college degrees is almost half that of other groups in the U.S. (16% versus 30%), there is a crisis in Native American college enrollment and degree attainment.

While this crisis has been simmering for nearly a decade, it gained broader attention in 2023 when the U.S. Supreme Court held in its decisions *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. (SFFA) v. President and Fellows of Harvard College (Harvard)*<sup>1</sup> and *SFFA v. University of North Carolina (UNC)*, Nos. 20-1199 and 21-707<sup>2</sup> that race-conscious affirmative action in college admissions programs violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (the *UNC/Harvard* decision). Because of this decision, colleges and universities could no longer consider race in admissions practices, and higher education institutions across the country began eliminating racial identity data from admissions applications.

Until that point, the affirmative action emphasis among higher education institutions and policy organizations was primarily focused on the educational participation of Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian populations. While the 2023 SCOTUS ruling also drew new attention to dramatic gaps in higher education participation among Native people, there were few pathways for intentional examination of Native students' experiences in ways that could transform participation. Policy organizations and higher education associations develop policy aimed at students in general or for specific student populations, but it is rare for policy considerations to include the impact of policy analysis and recommendations on Native populations.

As explored later in this report, Natives Americans have a unique, non-racial relationship with the United States based on their status as citizens of tribal Nations, a status derived from treaties and agreements between the United States and Indian Tribes. This status offers unique opportunities for policy development and advocacy that affirms political citizenship and fosters greater support for Native students and higher education. For a deeper

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<sup>1</sup> *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. (2023)*

<sup>2</sup> *Prelogar (2022)*



understanding of the challenges faced by Native students, the impact of factors related to economics, geography, and race, such as affirmative action, financial aid, recruitment and access, and higher education policy must also be considered. This report affirms the unique political status of Native people and recognizes that the data used throughout the report is from sources that treat American Indians and Alaska Natives as racial categories.

Following the 2023 SCOTUS decision, policy organizations, along with equity-focused nonprofits serving the broader Native higher education community, began offering insights into the impact of the affirmative action ruling. To date, there is little evidence that the end of affirmative action has had a specific impact on Native access to, and enrollment in, higher education. What is evident is that the higher education system in the United States inadequately serves tribal people. Educators and policy makers recognize that there are many pathways to employment and careers after high school, but tribal people place a particularly high value on the ways that college-educated Natives contribute to increased prosperity and well-being in tribal communities, where their professional and technical expertise is provided in ways that are rooted in cultural knowledge.

Through the networks of the College Fund, Brookings Institution, and IHEP, Indigenous higher education scholars, policy organization representatives, state higher education

officials, academic professionals, advocates, TCU presidents, NASNTI leadership, and other key stakeholders convened in June 2024 to examine the status of Native higher education policy and create a proactive, strategic approach to increase policy engagement on behalf of, and in collaboration with, Native students and their allies. This report resulted from that convening and additional research into Native higher education access and success. It recommends actions and progressive strategies to increase Native higher education participation.

## Native Education Facts and Figures



### HIGH SCHOOL

AIAN students have a lower high school graduation rate (75%) compared to the U.S. general population (87%).

NCES (n.d.-e)

### HIGHER EDUCATION

Nationally, AIANs have lower 2-year and 4-year graduation rates than their classmates from 2009-2018.

NCES (n.d.-i)

**COLLEGE-GOING RATE—Defined by the National Center of Educational Statistics is the % of 18-24-year-olds enrolled in college or graduate school.**

AIAN students ages 18 to 24 have the lowest college-going rate (25%) of any racial or ethnic group in the U.S. College-going rates for other groups include Pacific Islander (34%), Hispanic (36%), Black (36%), White (43%), and Asian (65%).

NCES (n.d.-i,-p)

The majority of AIAN college students (66%) attend 2-year or 4-year public colleges or universities.

NCES (n.d.-b)



## CONTEXT AND POLICY ADVOCACY

Contrary to widespread belief, the U.S. government does not offer universal benefits such as free education, housing, or healthcare to Native Americans. While specific programs and initiatives aim to support tribal communities, Native people do not automatically receive these basic necessities without conditions or requirements. The provision of these services and benefits is linked to treaties and agreements with specific Tribes and the U.S. government. Benefits are not universal across all 574 federally recognized Tribes in the U.S. To add to this complexity, federal recognition of Tribes means Indigenous people who are citizens of state recognized Tribes cannot access the limited resources that the federal government provides to fulfill their treaty obligations.

For this discussion, the educational journey of Native people begins with European contact in North America.<sup>3</sup> From the time of first contact between Europeans and Indigenous people in what is now the United States, there was a concerted effort by colonial powers and later by the federal government to remove Native people from their lands, usually by force, and to obliterate cultural identity through assimilation policies. The most infamous assimilationist implementation is in regards to [the boarding school era](#)<sup>4</sup> from the 1860s to 1960s. During this period the federal government appropriated funds to send Native children, some as young as two years old, to schools far from their families. There they were forbidden to speak their languages or practice their cultural ceremonies or traditions, and family bonds were severed.

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<sup>3</sup> Merskin (1998)

<sup>4</sup> Newland (2022)



Both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders have acknowledged the shortcomings in federal investment in Native higher education for nearly a century. *The Problem of Indian Administration*, the 1928 landmark report published by the Institute for Government Research, the precursor to the Brookings Institute, known colloquially as The Meriam Report, reported extensively on the damage federal policies caused in all aspects of AIAN life, including education, and provided numerous examples of how federal assimilationist policies harmed Native people.<sup>5</sup> The federal government further acknowledged the continued impact of assimilation and lack of investment in Native education in the Congressional report led by Senator Ted Kennedy's Subcommittee on Indian Education titled *Indian Education-A National Tragedy-A National Challenge*. In 2018, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights examined the status of investment of the federal government in their report: *Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans*, which updated its 2003 report, *A Quiet Crisis: Federal Funding and Unmet Needs in Indian Country*.

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<sup>5</sup> A Study of Conditions on Reservations conducted by Brookings Institution, 1928 (DPLA, 2018)

## AIAN Communities Facts and Figures

3.3M AIAN people identify as AIAN alone (1.3% of the U.S. population), and over 8.8M people identified alone or in combination with other racial groups in 2023.

U.S. Census Bureau (2023)

There are 574 federally recognized Tribes in the U.S., with 347 in the lower 48 states and 227 in Alaska, with an estimated 326 tribal homelands in the country.

U.S. Census Bureau (2023, October 3- November 15, IA, n.d.).

AIAN people have a higher federal poverty rate (23%) than the U.S. population (13%).

U.S. Census Bureau (2022)

State-recognized Tribes are not federally recognized but instead receive their recognition as Indian Tribes from state governments. There are approximately 16 states with state-recognized Indian Tribes.

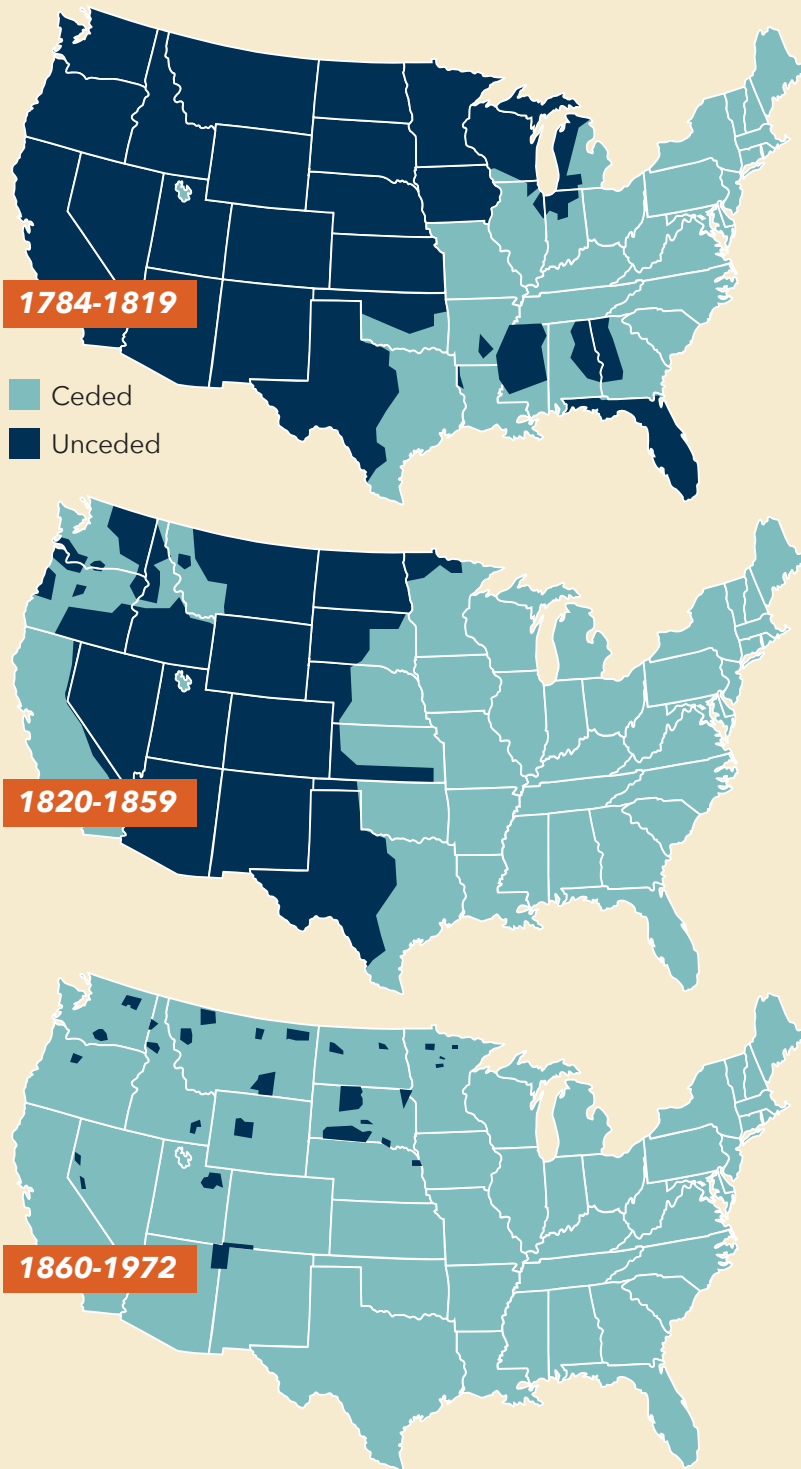
American Indians and Alaska Natives - What Are State Recognized Tribes? (n.d)

Unrecognized Tribes are those whose indigeneity and cohesion as a Native nation is not recognized by either the federal government or any state government.

American Indians and Alaska Natives - What Are State Recognized Tribes? (n.d)



## Maps showing post-colonial land cessions in the continental United States.



It is important to understand this history of violence and dispossession because Native people still experience the consequences of colonization.

Once the United States was established, the laws and policies of the federal and state governments expanded that dispossession, further negatively impacting the political and socioeconomic status of Native peoples.

In education, Native people continue to be impacted by these challenges which are rooted in laws and policies that create multifaceted systemic barriers which contribute to the low enrollment and decline in graduation rates among Native American students (Bureau of Indian Education, n.d.).

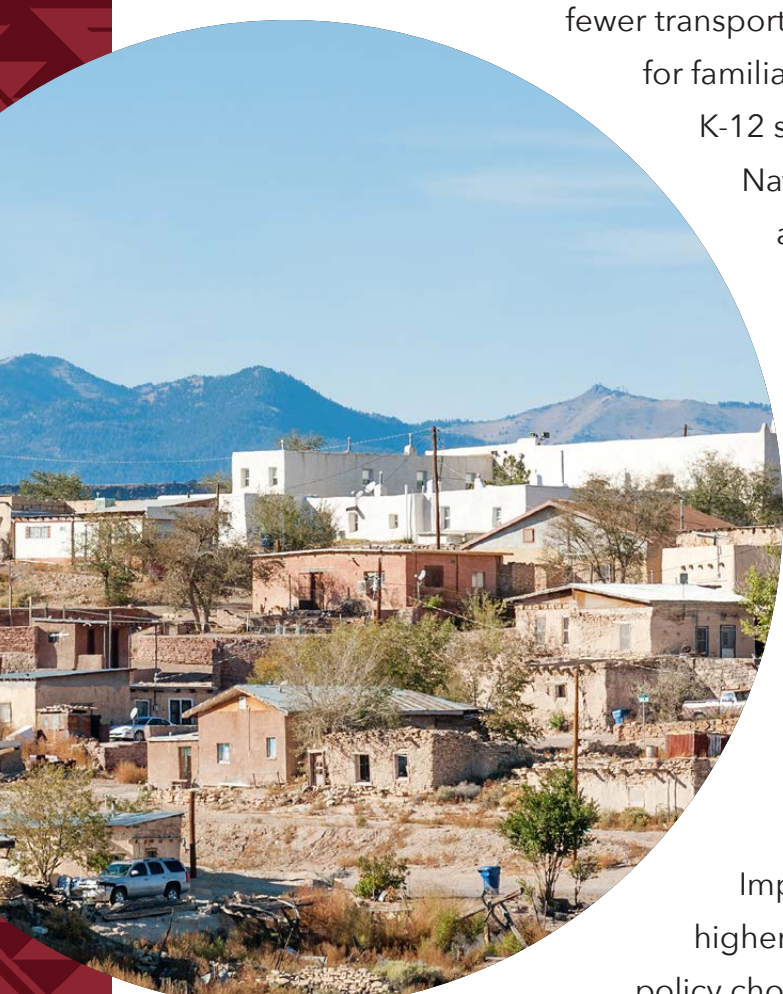
## WHY POLICY ADVOCACY MATTERS FOR NATIVE PEOPLE

Policy matters for all communities, but it is particularly critical for Native people and Native higher education. As mentioned earlier in this report, unique among groups in the United States, the United States government maintains a set of trust and treaty obligations to Tribes, which have a significant effect on Native student education, including higher education.

Native communities and Native students also face unique and, in some cases, significant, barriers to higher education. Many Native students have low incomes, which limits their opportunities for a higher education. Those who grow up in rural reservation communities may not have as much exposure to higher education opportunities, have fewer transportation opportunities, and may be place-bound for familial, communal, or cultural reasons. In addition, the K-12 schools that serve a disproportionate share of Native students, including both public institutions and those run by the federal Bureau of Indian Education, tend to have worse student outcomes<sup>6</sup> than other schools in the U.S.

Native higher educational institutions also frequently have unique characteristics. Many TCUs have a significant presence of Native faculty and incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into their curricula. At the same time, they are often under-resourced, which creates additional barriers to learning for Native students.

Importantly, many of the characteristics of Native higher education today are the result of deliberate policy choices made by the federal government over



<sup>6</sup> Blueprint for Reform Implementation (Bureau of Indian Education, n.d., paras. 1-2)



centuries—both destructive efforts to assimilate Native people into white, American society, as well as more recent efforts to preserve Native culture and support Native communities.

These factors make developing policy to encourage and support higher education critical for Native students and Native higher education institutions. But Native people are underrepresented in policy organizations and policymaking positions. In Congress, Native Americans accounted for about 1% of all representatives (four representatives and one senator) in 2024, despite Native people accounting for nearly 3% of the U.S. population. And Native people are even more underrepresented among mainstream policy organizations. Native Americans accounted for less than 1% of staff in a selection of national policy think tanks that publish demographic data. And among those that published data on raw employee counts by race and ethnicity, none had more than one Native American employee (Holub, 2019).<sup>7</sup>

This underrepresentation among policymakers and policy organizations results in Native American issues not being prioritized by those entities. Even more significantly, it means that policymakers and policy organizations may misunderstand the critical distinctions that exist for Native people and Tribes in the U.S. Because these institutions are critical for informing the general public, underrepresentation in these institutions begets further misconceptions among the public as a whole.

One example of how Native higher education institutions can be misunderstood is the perception of TCUs as a form of minority-serving institution (MSI). While TCUs are often classified as MSIs, several policy-relevant factors distinguish them from other MSIs. For one, they are controlled by Tribes, not by state higher education systems or private non-profit entities. And they receive the bulk of their funding based on the number of enrolled Native students, a funding structure that is unique in higher education. However, policymakers are frequently unaware of these distinctions. As such, they often lump TCUs into programs and funding streams for MSIs—even though many of those funding streams may be less accessible or relevant to TCUs, given their unique characteristics. When

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<sup>7</sup> To determine this, the author team reviewed the public websites of 40 think tanks selected from the University of Pennsylvania's Top Think Tanks rankings (<https://guides.library.upenn.edu/c.php?g=1035991&p=7509974>): the top 35 think tanks listed, plus Aspen Institute, New America Foundation, Third Way, Washington Center for Equitable Growth, and the Center for Economic and Policy Research. Of the 40 think tanks reviewed, 12 posted data about staff demographics. None of the 12 had more than 1% AIAN staff, and of those that posted individual employee numbers by Native group, none had more than a single AIAN staff member.

those in a position to influence policy do not understand the distinctions, it means Native entities must take on additional work or risk missing equal opportunities.

In 2018, Reclaiming Native Truth, a partnership between EchoHawk Consulting and First Nations Development Institute, conducted extensive research on non-Native perceptions and understanding of Native people in the United States. Congressional informants were specifically targeted to discuss policy and experiences with Native issues. A report on the initiative's findings shares "Respondents in our interviews said that most policymakers have little knowledge of Native issues and do not understand treaties or trust obligations to Tribes, since many do not have Tribes in their districts..."<sup>8</sup>

### Clearly, Native higher education issues need a more robust policy profile for three reasons:

- ◆ The challenges many Native communities face are more acute than others;
- ◆ The challenges Native communities face have been largely created by federal policy actions, some of which still exist; and
- ◆ There remain significant misunderstandings around Native people and Native higher education institutions among the general U.S. public.

<sup>8</sup> Reclaiming Native Truth (2018)



## POLICY CHALLENGES, AND CONVENING FOR ACTION

As mentioned above, Native voices remain underrepresented in policy positions. This underrepresentation means that policy organizations frequently do not have a solid baseline understanding of Native American policy issues, including those in higher education. This is particularly problematic because, as outlined in this report, Native Americans face distinct challenges in higher education compared to other populations in the U.S. Without a more robust and consistent pipeline of Native policy professionals and policy products, Native organizations must frequently revert to communicating basic or introductory information to familiarize policymakers with the issues facing Native people and Native organizations. This makes it more difficult for Native policy thinkers to delve more deeply into strategic policy solutions.

Existing funding models also create challenges for Native higher education policy. Many policy organizations are non-profits that rely on grants and other philanthropic funding. Because [less than 0.5% of all philanthropic giving](#) in the U.S. goes to Native causes there is also relatively little funding to go around for Native policy work, including Native higher education policy work.

While there is a vibrant community of research and policy experts working in Native higher education, it is a relatively small community spread throughout the country. In recent years, the widespread adoption of remote work platforms has meant that there are growing opportunities to collaborate virtually. However, opportunities to convene, exchange ideas, and develop new concepts in person are relatively rare.

Some organizations, such as the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) or the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), hold regular convenings. However, these convenings focus either broadly on Native education rather than higher education specifically (in the case of NIEA), or on issues pertaining to TCUs specifically (in the case of AIHEC). There are relatively few opportunities focused on Native higher education as a sector.

Moreover, because of the structure of how research and policy work are conducted in the U.S., researchers and policy professionals frequently work in silos. A significant share of research is concentrated within academic institutions themselves. In addition, academic social science research is often focused on identifying and quantifying societal problems and is frequently light on policy. When it does contain policy content, it is often just at a broad conceptual level. While some academic researchers do policy work, policy development is more often concentrated in think tanks, associations, and advocacy organizations. Connections between academic researchers and these institutions tend to be inconsistent, with many policy organizations basing their recommendations on their own research or the needs of members. As such, many people working in Native higher education research may not see their ideas get translated into policy.



# HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY CONVENING

On June 4 and 5, 2024, the College Fund, Brookings, and IHEP, held a Native Higher Education Policy Convening at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. to discuss AIAN higher education policies and practices.

## **The convening was designed to achieve the following objectives:**

- ◆ To provide space for experts and stakeholders to discuss and assess the research and policy landscape in Native higher education.
- ◆ To provide a platform for Indigenous experts and stakeholders to collaboratively address challenges, articulate needs, and furnish recommendations aimed at improving those challenges and needs.
- ◆ To create a space where representatives can come together to clarify the needs and issues to improve Native student outcomes in higher education.
- ◆ To produce and publish a report to raise awareness and stimulate dialogue, drawing attention to the importance of policy-relevant research efforts to support the academic and life progressions of Native students, including, but not limited to, Native community growth and abundance.

Fifty experts and stakeholders participated from across the U.S., including Indigenous higher education scholars, policy organization representatives, state higher education officials, academic professionals, advocates, TCU presidents, NASNTI leadership, and other key stakeholders (Appendix A).

The convening used Indigenous learning methodologies to gather information for this report. A description of the convening's methodology and design is provided in Appendix B.



## CONVENING LEARNINGS

The key issues and challenges in AIAN higher education are complex and deeply rooted in colonization, which used U.S. laws and policies to attempt to assimilate tribal peoples and dispossess them of their ancestral lands. As such, the effects of this historical legislation continue to impact the socio-economic status, educational attainment, employment opportunities, healthcare access, and overall quality of life for Native peoples today.

The June 2024 convening focused on Native higher education and specifically brought together researchers and policy staff, and was (to date) a relatively rare opportunity for sharing knowledge for mutual learning, idea creation, and strategy setting among individuals working in the Native higher education space.

This summary report elevates key learnings from the convening. It outlines many priority areas for Native higher education policy work and is a resource for individuals working in both Native higher education research and policy. For researchers, this report provides an overview of key areas experts in the field identified as requiring further work. For policy professionals, this piece provides a baseline understanding of what makes Native higher education unique, as well as a set of issue areas in need of further policy development and policy change.



## Key Issues Impacting American Indian and Alaska Native Higher Education

- ◆ **Data Capacity and Accuracy:** Data specific to Native people continues to be limited and inaccurate, fueling misinformation about student outcomes and experiences.
- ◆ **Communication:** Too little effective communication and collaboration among stakeholders in early education and beyond is a key factor preventing many Native students from progressing.
- ◆ **Limited Funding:** Insufficient financial resources to fully fund Native student access, such as scholarships, prevent Native students from accessing quality education, further hindering their chances of success at the college level. TCUs, which educate between 10-13% of all Native college students, are not fully funded for operational support. A similar percentage of Natives attend NASNTIs, which are also inadequately funded to provide the necessary, robust, comprehensive support Native students need to succeed in college.
- ◆ **Policies in Conflict:** The world of educational policy can be complicated for Native people. Tribal and state education systems, as well as institutions, do not always pull in the same direction, making it difficult to tackle the challenges in Native higher education effectively.
- ◆ **Legal Complexity:** Because of the political and legal complexities associated with tribal sovereignty, appropriate educational policy initiatives are often difficult to execute due to the disconnect among tribal, state, and federal governments' structures.
- ◆ **Historical Barriers:** Systemic and historical barriers persist and impede Native students' access to, and success in, higher education.
- ◆ **Non-Inclusive Institutional Priorities:** Institutional priorities often do not include AIAN voices or needs or leave Native people out of the decision-making processes that impact their educational journeys.



## PARTNERING TO CREATE BETTER POLICIES

To create a higher education system that equally and fully supports the success of Native students, it is necessary to engage multiple stakeholders: Native organizations, policy organizations, Indigenous scholars, Tribes, legislators, federal and state agencies, students, and more.

Convening participants identified a set of overarching issues that is necessary to address the academic success of Native students in post-secondary education. The critical issues are:

- ◆ Improving Native student identification and overcoming existing data challenges.
- ◆ Reducing the graduation gap between Native students and other students.
- ◆ Halting counterproductive anti-DEI legislation and policy.

By building capacity across national groups that support Native students' postsecondary access and success, and engaging decision-makers in meaningful ways, far-reaching policy recommendations can be derived from these overarching issues. "[\*Opening the Promise: The Five Principles of Equitable Policymaking\*](#)" can assist in the policymaking process and serve as a guide for improving it. It highlights key principles that foster fairness and inclusivity, ensuring that varied viewpoints are considered and policies effectively meet the needs of all communities..<sup>9</sup>



### **CRITICAL OVERARCHING ISSUE:**

## Native Student Identification and Data Challenges

Participants agreed that issues associated with Native student identification and data are linked to their political identity. (See Appendix C for a white paper on tribal political identity.)

The Nation-to-Nation relationship that is the underpinning of this political identity emerges from treaties and agreements between Tribes and the United States government. The political identity of Native students provides a unique argument that investment in programming that supports Native students' postsecondary success is not because of

<sup>9</sup> Institute for Higher Education (2022)



students' status as citizens of Tribes rather than race. Treaties and agreements with Tribes can include provisions for educational support that promote tribal self-determination and reparative investment.

Data challenges affecting Native students are often discussed from the perspective of race, because it is the common approach to student data across various opportunities. However, convening participants believe there is a unique opportunity to advocate for Native students through a commitment to tribal self-determination and reparative investment.

A variety of student identification and data challenges currently exist that make data more unreliable for Native students than other groups. These include shortcomings in the federal government's data collection and data systems, inconsistent policy design, and recent court rulings that have weakened the quality of higher education data.

Currently, most public higher education data comes from the Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Higher education institutions that receive federal funding must report certain data to IPEDS, including the race and ethnicity of enrolled students. A significant amount of public research on Native students in higher education is derived from IPEDS data. However, IPEDS data has several shortcomings that disproportionately affect Native students.

First, only individuals who identify as one race alone are counted in each racial category in IPEDS. Students who identify as multiracial are classified under a separate "two-or-more races" category, regardless of their racial identity. This data aggregation decision disproportionately harms the quality of data around Native students. While just over 10% of white and Black Americans and less than 20% of Asian Americans identify as multiracial, over 60% of American Indian and Alaska Native identify as multiracial. This means that most AIAN students are likely not having their data included in the AIAN category in IPEDS.

In addition, all students who identify as Latino or Hispanic, regardless of racial background, are classified as Hispanic in IPEDS. Nearly a third of AIANs are classified as Hispanic, meaning those students are also classified in a different category. Some Hispanic

Native Americans are also multiracial and would have otherwise been categorized in the “two-or-more races” bucket, while others are single-race, and so would have been classified in the AIAN bucket.

The detrimental result of these data aggregation choices is the American Indian and Alaska Native data in IPEDS may account for as little as 23% of all AIAN students. In other words, over three-quarters of all Native students likely are not being counted as such in IPEDS and are classified as either Hispanic or two-or-more races. This exclusion of Native students from data makes it particularly difficult to draw informed conclusions around the wellbeing of Native students overall.

In addition to excluding multiracial and Hispanic Native students, IPEDS data also does not collect any information about tribal affiliation. This makes IPEDS data significantly less useful for tribal governments, many of which run their own school systems and may be interested in tracking how students from their communities are represented in higher education. Tribal governments invest in students who are citizens of their Nations through programs like scholarships and would benefit from greater data about how students from their Tribe are faring in higher education.



Beyond IPEDS, Native students face an array of data-related challenges that other groups do not need to contend with. One is the federal government's definition of American Indian or Alaska Native. As this report has mentioned elsewhere, the federal government has a unique trust and treaty obligation to Tribes and their citizens. The federal government's count of AIAN citizens is derived from the census and other government surveys, including data collected by the Department of Education. In this data, the federal government defines "American Indian and Alaska Natives" as, "individuals who are [Indigenous to anywhere in the Americas](#)—inclusive of Canada, Mexico, Central America, and South America." This means the count of Native people assembled by the U.S. government through data such as the U.S. Census and the Department of Education does not actually align with how the federal government approaches its obligations to tribal governments and Native people. Despite this, many of the federal government's programs supporting Native communities rely on data collected through federal agencies using this broader definition of AIAN.

Moreover, different federal programs have different definitions of "American Indian or Alaska Native." For example, the federal government funds TCUs based on the number of tribal citizens or descendants of tribal citizens that they enroll. However, the federal government uses a completely different set of criteria for the NASNTI program. To qualify for that program, a school must have at least 10% Native student enrollment, with Native students being defined using the IPEDS definition.

Finally, recent court rulings have exacerbated these data challenges. The Supreme Court's [2023 ruling outlawing race-conscious admissions in higher education](#) has negatively impacted data quality. In the wake of that ruling, a growing number of students are choosing not to identify their race or ethnicity at all. This means the data available to both institutions and the public is not as comprehensive as it was. The resulting reduction in data quality can affect both the quality of research around Native students as well as potentially the resources that institutions have available to support Native students. For example, if a large enough number of Native students choose not to identify their race or ethnicity, it may affect an institution's ability to qualify for programs such as the NASNTI program.



**CRITICAL OVERARCHING ISSUE:**

## The Graduation Gap: Native Students in Higher Education

Native engagement and success have been negatively affected by historical and present-day political economies that serve to prevent Native people from accessing higher education opportunities. The fact is that Native people are not finishing college or graduating at the same rate as other students.



Native students have the lowest college enrollment of any race. Perhaps most alarming is that the **enrollment rate for Native students dropped by 40% between 2010 and 2021.**<sup>10</sup> This is the largest decrease among all racial and ethnic groups. The decrease may be attributed to historical, political, and economic factors that disproportionately affect Native students' enrollment in college.



The large percentage of tribal students who do not complete high school may contribute to their low enrollment in higher education. According to 2024 National Center for Education Statistics data, Native students finish high school at 74% compared to the U.S. average of 87%.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Native students have less exposure to college-focused messaging from teachers and counselors and fewer opportunities to participate in high school-to-college bridge programs. In addition, Native high school students who attend rural or remote schools or schools with fewer resources might not receive college preparation support. Research shows they have significantly lower access to advanced placement courses among all other racial/ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> These opportunities help high school students to identify as future college students and prepare them for the demands of postsecondary courses.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10, 11, 12</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2024)

<sup>13</sup> Crazy Bull (2024)



For Native students who enroll in college, we can look at their graduation rates to understand how they fare compared to other groups.



**Twenty-seven percent** of Native students graduate from a public community college within three years. While this is the same graduation rate as Latinx people (27%) and higher than Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (23%) and Black (21%) students, it is far below that of Asian American (42%) and White (36%) students.

Native students fare worse at public four-year colleges, where **37% graduate within six years**. This is the lowest rate compared to all racial and ethnic groups. The next lowest graduation rate is experienced by Black students (42%). The highest graduation rate is achieved by Asian American students (74%).



Together, these numbers show that greater support and earlier interventions are needed to improve the success of Native students overall—but particularly at four-year institutions. These findings reveal that these gaps can be eliminated by removing financial obstacles, reinforcing cultural aid, and boosting services to retain Native students in higher education.

University of Arizona researcher Jameson Lopez, a citizen of the Fort Yuma Quechan Tribe and a scholar of Native student higher education experiences, conducted a literature review on the factors influencing Native students' postsecondary persistence, or their continued enrollment and progress toward a degree or credential.<sup>14</sup> Lopez identified four themes:

- ◆ **Family support:** Students are more likely to persist when they have encouragement from family members, feel personal motivation to be a role model, or want to make their family proud.
- ◆ **Institutional support:** Services that help students adjust to college life, connect with peer mentors, and provide academic and social support can help students feel they belong and combat cultural differences. Faculty have a strong influence on Native students' persistence through their classroom instruction and mentorship.
- ◆ **Tribal community support:** This factor differentiates Native students from other groups. Native students are often motivated to “give back” to their tribal communities by completing their degrees.
- ◆ **Academic preparation and performance:** Native students who feel academically prepared for college courses or receive additional remediation tend to persist longer than their peers who do not.

Similarly, a study on college affordability identified financial, personal, and family factors influencing Native students' education progression ([Reyes & Shotton H.J., 2018](#)). Better ties to tribal culture and fewer expenses, along with a mother's higher education level, were linked to the pursuit of higher education. Racism and stereotyping on campus, as well as familial obligations, hindered some Indigenous students' sense of belonging and led to some leaving college.

Students benefit from access to culturally and spiritually enriching activities; validation, encouragement, and participation in cultural/spiritual life; and supportive family and community ties; allowing them to frequently visit home and connect with peers, faculty, and staff. Having shared spaces where other Native students are present also fosters a sense of community. Graduation represents growth, serving as a role model, and instilling a sense of responsibility to contribute positively to their tribe and Nation-building.

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<sup>14</sup> Lopez (2017)



## **CRITICAL OVERARCHING ISSUE:**

# Impact of DEI and anti-DEI Bills on Native Students in Higher Education

Extensive investment in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives occurred across American society, including in higher education, following the death of George Floyd in 2020 and the Covid pandemic. However, the momentum of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives has diminished in the years since (2021-24). Anti-DEI legislation has been introduced in nineteen states and two bills have been introduced in Congress.<sup>15</sup> Anti-DEI legislation is currently being tracked by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.<sup>16</sup> With the change in elected leadership in 2025, including the office of the U.S. President as well as the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, leaders who firmly believe DEI to be useless are likely to accelerate anti-DEI practices in the coming years, and the legal landscape is unlikely to shift in favor of race-conscious policy any time soon.

While the decision to eliminate affirmative action appears to have had limited impact on Native college admissions, it is widely acknowledged that the publicity around the SCOTUS decision could have a detrimental effect on whether Native students feel welcome on college campuses.<sup>17</sup>

Anti-DEI legislation can severely undercut initiatives that provide increased pathways to higher education. Once enacted, these bills have been shown to disrupt student engagement centers. For example, the *Texas Observer* reported that at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin, “the Multicultural Engagement Center shut its doors on January 1, 2024.<sup>18</sup> As a result, longstanding UT programs such as “New Black Student Weekend, Adelante, CultivAsian...Latino Leadership Council, Native American and Indigenous Collective, [and] Students for Equity and Diversity,” were discontinued. These engagement centers provide academic support, financial aid assistance, cultural programs, and other amenities students need to succeed on campus.

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<sup>15</sup> Hicks (2024)

<sup>16</sup> The Chronicle for Higher Education (2024)

<sup>17</sup> Van Alstin (2023)

<sup>18</sup> Flannery (2024)

# ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This analysis sheds light on the intricate and often challenging relationships that exist between national, state, and tribal governments, illustrating the unique difficulties faced by AIAN communities and their students. The findings underscore the importance of shared responsibility and action across various stakeholders, including institutions, policymakers, and community leaders.



**The three main focus areas established during the convening were to:**

**1**

Establish set policies to standardize effective and appropriate processes to ensure accurate Native student identification and to support efforts to meet current data challenges.

**2**

Understand and address the alarming graduation gap that continues to increase.

**3**

Understand the impact of anti-DEI legislation and gather support, devise strategies, and create collaborations to limit harm caused by anti-DEI legislation.



The results of the convening also suggest that major reforms in governmental and educational policies are needed to establish a supportive and culturally affirming environment for Native students, which can enable them to be more academically successful at higher levels of education. Policy change in these areas can enhance accessibility, affordability, and support for Native students in higher education, and improve their pathways to success. The following recommendations address these critical areas.

# Current Native Higher Education Policy Recommendations

## Promoting Collaborative and Inclusive Data and Research

While research and the creation of policy recommendations in higher education are already underway across institutions, states, and the federal government, it is critical to improve inclusion of Native populations in such policies. This improved visibility is essential for enhancing research and policy initiatives targeting Native communities. To this end, the convening participants recommend the following.

### Collaboration

Collaboration was highlighted in various forms. The group emphasized the value of creating opportunities for Native scholars to incorporate their place-based knowledge into research agendas which partners could then conduct research with tribal communities and translate those co-create agendas into policies. This collaborative approach requires a commitment to reciprocity and equitably shared resources.

Several collaborations exist where university systems partner closely with Tribes to provide critical supports for tribal health, natural resources, education, and other priorities. The University of Washington Center for Indigenous Health, the University of Oklahoma's American Indian and Indigenous Law Program, and the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona are all models for research, policy, and advocacy collaborations.

### Funding

Access to increased funding is necessary for substantive research and policy development. The participants emphasized that funding mechanisms need to be grounded in trust-based giving that honors the lived experiences and needs of Native communities.

For federal, state, tribal, and institutional budget allocations to be meaningful, intentional consultation with education experts such as Native-serving nonprofits, Native scholars, and tribal education departments should be the norm in the allocation of resources. At a minimum, policy organizations should build a network of tribal scholars and advocates to support decisions about funding priorities focused on research and advocacy.

Philanthropy should use its role as an innovative investor in community-driven opportunities to intentionally and quickly allocate significantly more resources to action-based research



that not only informs audiences about the successes and challenges for Native students and Native higher education, but also to recommend solutions rooted in trusting and open community participation.

Opportunities to promote Native inclusion and systemic change through the allocation of resources to tribal liaisons who work with Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), policy and non-profit organizations, and scholars were specifically identified as needed.

### **Access to Resources/Roadmaps**

To promote inclusive AIAN student data and scholarly research into current work around higher education policy, attendees brought up the need to refer to resources and roadmaps of work that are already being done successfully.

#### **Convening participants identified the following as examples of resources:**

New Mexico Public Education Department, Student Needs Assessment.

[https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NMPED\\_Student-Needs-Assessment-Comprehensive-Needs-Assessment-HB-250\\_.pdf](https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NMPED_Student-Needs-Assessment-Comprehensive-Needs-Assessment-HB-250_.pdf)

Office of Public Instruction, Montana State University, Indian Education for All, Learning Hubs.

<https://learninghub.mrooms.net/course/index.php?categoryid=105>

American Indian and Minority Achievement & K-12 Partnerships (AIMA)

<https://mus.edu/AIMA/aima-one-page-brief.html>

Tribal Nations in Montana: A Handbook for Legislators (2020).

<https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Publications/services/2020-agency-reports/tribal-nations-handbook-nov-5-2020.pdf>

## Better Data

Better data means being able to disaggregate data to subgroups, standardize data across systems, work with smaller sample sizes to prevent suppression, and employ oversampling strategies with Native communities to increase Native representation in research findings. This includes recommendations to collect information on tribal affiliation, including students from state-recognized Tribes (not solely federally recognized Tribes). Native people are diverse and do not want to be seen as a monolithic culture.

As referenced in the discussion on Native student identity, it is critical that agencies and organizations that collect data collaborate on definitions. This can be achieved at the federal level through the advocacy of policy organizations such as NIEA, and can be further supported by research from think tanks and similar organizations, including convening partners and attendees such as Brookings, IHEP, the Urban Institute, and others.

## Representation

Convening participants affirmed the necessity of policy organizations raising the profile of Native scholars and providing context to non-Native people, so policy is informed by the lived experiences of Native people.

As discussed throughout this report, representation must be more than symbolic. It must include consultation and the direct participation of Tribes, Native-serving nonprofits, and Native scholars.



# Strategies for Policy Engagement for Institutions of Higher Education

Nurturing relationships among Tribes, Native people, and IHEs is crucial for several reasons. First, it promotes inclusivity and understanding in academic environments, allowing Indigenous students to feel valued and supported. Second, building these relationships helps to address educational disparities, as Native students are more likely to thrive in settings where they feel connected and recognized. Lastly, fostering these relationships enhances the diversity of perspectives within higher education, enriching the learning experience for all students in and out of their classroom setting and throughout the campus.

## **Building Institutional Commitments to Tribal Students' Political Identity**

Creating institutional policies and practices that reflect the political classification of tribal citizens helps shield Native students and programs from anti-DEI policies and program reduction and honors Native students' unique experiences.

## **Understanding the Barriers to Access and Success**

Many Native students encounter structural conditions, such as economic hardship, remoteness from service centers, and the absence of culturally relevant support services, which inhibit their advancement and retention in education. Specific investments in financial aid, virtual access, and cultural competency training can reduce structural barriers.



### **Institutions can offer valuable support in various ways, including:**

- ◆ access to cultural and spiritual activities by creating safe spaces and resources for students so they can remain connected to their identity when navigating an otherwise unfamiliar place in college;
- ◆ supporting family and community ties through public activities such as speakers and social events;
- ◆ the opportunity to go home or remain otherwise connected to their origins and family;
- ◆ connections with peers, faculty, and staff on campus, including gathering places for Native students;
- ◆ visible representation and inclusion in campus marketing and advocacy resources, such as advisory groups;
- ◆ curriculum that reflects the contemporary and historical contributions of Tribes;
- ◆ training for staff and faculty on Indigenous knowledge systems and the high-value impact of DEI programming.

### **Importance of Community Engagement and Reciprocal Relationships**

Building strong, reciprocal relationships between IHEs that serve Native students and their communities is vital to instilling a sense of belonging, increasing academic success, and promoting and maintaining cultural identity within the educational environment. IHEs should acknowledge and respect cultural practices to foster trust. In addition, IHEs must acknowledge that work and relationships are approached differently in Indian Country, and timelines should correspond to building mutually beneficial relationships.

## **Incorporate Diverse Native Viewpoints and Voices in Higher Education**

IHEs ensure diverse representation of Native voices, including tribal government representatives, education organizations and departments, Native scholars, and students, as well as those who have left higher education, in policy discussions to gather varying perspectives.

## **Support and Promote Culturally Responsive Policies**

It is imperative that IHEs increase awareness about the distinct challenges facing tribal communities and endorse culturally responsive policies recommended by the Tribes, who possess insight into their needs and how to support their communities, foster trust, and support decisions.

Culturally responsive policies can include ensuring that sufficient funds are allocated to Native student groups for their campus-based cultural programming or providing a place on campus for those students who want access to ceremonial resources.

A good example of a culturally responsive practice is the allocation of emergency student aid that includes travel resources, so students can return to their home communities to take care of family or cultural responsibilities and have the resources to return to college to continue their studies.

## **Support Native-Led Organizations**

IHEs should advocate and call for direct funding and resources to be given to Native-led organizations that actively contribute to Native higher education policies as stakeholders who are invested in their communities to bolster tribal initiatives. In addition, IHEs should ensure these organizations are recognized as co-equal collaboration partners.

For example, four entities are among the leading providers of scholarships and related support services for Native students in higher education. The College Fund; Native Forward Scholars; AISES: Advancing Indigenous People in STEM; and Indigenous Education, Inc. (Cobell Scholarships) are all critically underfunded and unable to provide scholarship resources to all their scholarship applicants. There is also a significant gap in available funding for any expansion of the applicant pool.



AIHEC and NIEA, both organizations serving large Native constituencies, are unable to provide expanded support for policies and programs because of a lack of funding.

### **Create Long-Term, Non-transactional Relationships**

IHEs should develop non-transactional relationships with Native communities focusing on social engagement and values rather than just outcomes. This approach demonstrates a dedication to the well-being of Native communities that emphasizes relationships not for the short-term, or as a means to an end, but rather as an ongoing process.

Information for potential and existing partners on how to navigate tribal communities and institutions that serve Native communities is available. Cheryl Crazy Bull, current President of the College Fund, and Justin Guillory, former President of Northwest Indian College, shared recommendations for building partnerships grounded in traditional tribal knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

### **Elevate Native Representation and Narrative Change**

IHEs should promote the inclusion of Indigenous faculty, staff, students, and leaders within higher education institutions and make them part of change-making for sustainable representation. They should also collaborate with Tribes and advocates to drive narrative change by redefining Indigenous identity as a political identity rooted in the Nation-to-Nation status of Tribes.

Narrative change resources to increase awareness of Indigenous people are readily available through organizations such as the College Fund, IllumiNative, National Urban Indian Families Coalition, Native Organizers Alliance, and National Congress of American Indians.

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<sup>19</sup> Guillory & Crazy Bull (2023)





## MODELS FOR NATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION: TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

TCUs are resources that can strengthen the climate around Native higher education policy. These institutions and the organizations that support them, including AIHEC and the College Fund, can serve as connectors to tribal scholars and place-based strategies. They hold expertise in the education of Native adults and the engagement of tribal communities. They also provide funding for programming and resources for urban Indigenous populations.

The TCU system creates a more supportive environment for Native students through better practices and policies that provide culturally relevant education to Native students. By offering tailored services to address student-specific needs that combine academic support and cultural and personal well-being, Native students are likely to meet their education goals.



## The number and type of all degree programs across 34 TCUs 2022-2023:

**427**

Associate degrees

**270**

Certificates, Diplomas, and Endorsements

**131**

Bachelor's degrees

**17**

Master's degrees

### Doctorate degree – 0

One TCU (Navajo Technical University) currently offers a Ph.D. program in Diné Culture and Language Sustainability but did not offer it in AY 2022-23.

AIHEC (n.d.-a,-b)



## Enrollment and Graduation Rates

*13% of all American Indian and Alaska Native college students attend a tribal college or university*

**13%**

Tribal Colleges

**87%**

Non-tribal Colleges

**13%**

Non-Native students who are not members of a Tribe.

**87%**

AIAN

AIHEC (2023)  
NCES (2023)

AIHEC (n.d.-a,-b)

# STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG POLICY ORGANIZATIONS, NATIVE ADVOCATES, AND SCHOLARS

Transparent and intentional relationships play a critical role in enabling policy entities, Native voices, and scholars to effectively create bias-neutral policies that promote fairness, inclusivity, and Native perspectives. These relationships can provide sustainable education advancements and improve academic outcomes for Native students through fostered collaboration and trust. Based on our findings, we recommend the following.

## **Establishing Trust Through Engagement**

Developing meaningful relationships with Native scholars is rooted in ongoing engagement and open communication and is the basis for mutual respect that can set the platform for building authentic relationships. These engagements foster trust and mutual respect, which can lead to collaborative research projects and initiatives.

- ◆ Offer Native scholars the opportunity to lead or partner in conducting research.
- ◆ Ensure Native inclusion by using Indigenous research, community engagement, and evaluation methodologies.

## **Build Native Research Capabilities**

Many Native scholars engage in critical research about their communities but are not experienced with creating policy from that research. Policy organizations and IHEs can play a valuable role by training scholars to translate research into policy and supporting their understanding of how to move policy through systems, including legislatures.



## **Empowering Future Leaders and Advocates**

Increased representation in policy organizations would amplify the voices of Native students and empowers individuals with the tools to achieve their academic potential while preparing the next generation of leaders to take on roles that shape and advocate for their communities. Representation includes board service, executive and mid-level hiring, and research positions.

## **Supporting Professional Development and Advocacy**

Policy organizations can work with IHEs and Native nonprofits to target resources and programs which support the professional development of Native scholars, assist with career promotion, networking, and meaningful contributions to their field and tribal community.

## **Listening to Tribal Leadership**

Policy organizations, Native and non-Native educational advocates, and institutions can actively seek and incorporate the perspectives of tribal leadership on higher education and policy. Understanding the views of Native community members can help shape more relevant and effective education policies.

This advocacy can take the form of consultation through listening sessions, meetings with tribal officials, engaging with national Native organizations, and ensuring representation with advisory processes.





# STRATEGIES FOR ELEVATING TRIBAL NATION ENGAGEMENT WITH HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

In the United States, tribal sovereignty refers to the inherent authority of Indigenous Tribes to govern themselves within their territory.<sup>20</sup> Self-governance ranges from education and health care to natural resources. Within this framework, each Tribe is a “separated” sovereign: independent, politically domestic dependent political entity having the right to govern itself and subject only to existing treaties and the application of federal law and court decisions.

The recognition of Tribes within policy frameworks is critical for building mutual respect and understanding, filling a void that has long separated Indigenous traditions from modern governance. To achieve this, we recommend the following.

## **Policy-Inclusive Frameworks**

The inclusion of tribal representatives in policy frameworks is crucial. It ensures that the unique perspective and cultural heritage of Native communities are taken into account, leading to decision-making that results in more equitable outcomes across the education sector.

A recent example is the bipartisan support for legislation in Colorado that included active engagement from the Colorado Commission on Indian Affairs office and commission resulting in legislation that provides in-state tuition for citizens of 48 Tribes with historical ties to Colorado, along with a bill addressing American Indian mascots at schools to support a more inclusive academic environment.<sup>21</sup>

By adopting policy-inclusive frameworks that involve tribal leadership, legislation can significantly enhance educational equity for Native students and help eliminate offensive mascots, such as the one used by the Arickaree School District, which was changed from the "Indians" to the "Wolves." This change demonstrates a commitment to respecting Native cultures and fosters a more welcoming school environment within the state.

<sup>20</sup> National Congress of American Indians (2020)

<sup>21</sup> Colorado American Indian Tribes In-State Tuition | Colorado General Assembly SB21-029 (2021)

## Co-Created Policy

To enhance collaborative policy efforts, regular consultations and workshops should be conducted to address the needs of Native communities, incorporating tribal perspectives into higher education strategies to build transparency and trust.

Frequent meetings involving tribal leaders, community members, policy organizations, federal and state agencies, and higher education institutions will ensure that policies reflect tribal priorities and uphold sovereignty. These initiatives will help create inclusive and adaptive policies.

This method will enhance transparency and trust as Tribes work together to co-develop policies that reflect their priorities and sovereignty like SB21-02922 and Senate Bill 21-116.<sup>23</sup>

## Community Capacity-Building Initiatives

Building capacity within communities is essential for creating a strong foundation for effective policy-making. Fostering initiatives that encourage the sharing of knowledge and skills can strengthen the collective ability to address important issues impacting tribal communities. Experienced policymakers and tribal leaders play a vital role in this process, offering guidance and support to help ensure that community-building efforts are sustainable and impactful in Native communities.

It's crucial that tribal representatives have the training and tools to effectively participate in these policy environments by developing more policy-focused learning experiences and resources for understanding policies, as well as to engage with the existing education stakeholders. This would greatly amplify tribal perspectives in educational policies.

Providing communities with the right training and tools, fosters understanding around the educational policies impacting Native communities.

These trainings can be offered by higher education institutions, especially when centers or divisions are specifically organized to support tribal development, federal and state agencies, and non-profits, especially those focused on tribal community and social development.

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<sup>22</sup> Colorado General Assembly SB 21-029 (2021)

<sup>23</sup> Colorado General Assembly SB 21-116 (2021)

## ADVICE FOR TRIBES

Tribes can engage with policy organizations, IHEs, state and federal agencies, legislatures, and Native non-profits to explore opportunities for tribally led, tribally inclusive policy development.

### **Higher Education as a Tribal Priority**

Higher education trains people for leadership, managerial, and specialized roles, which are all vital to tribal sovereignty and prosperity. Tribes are urged to prioritize higher education in their advocacy, to issue calls to action for needed research and related policy recommendations, and to examine relationships focused on policy for inclusive practices and equitable resource allocation.

National and regional organizations that can serve as resources for tribal governments to learn more about policy engagement include:

- ◆ National Congress of American Indians
- ◆ National Indian Education Association
- ◆ Tribal Education Departments National Assembly
- ◆ American Indian Higher Education Consortium

### **Data Sovereignty**

A commitment to the development of data systems that more effectively track child, youth, and adult education participation in education that exercises the right of Tribes to support the wellbeing of their citizens is needed. Data systems can help inform investment, identify proven practices, and elevate the successful attainment of both individual and tribal education priorities.

The [U.S. Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network](#) is a resource for data systems planning and advocacy.

## College Pathways and Affordability

Ensuring that young people and adults have access to career education and counseling through engagement with high schools, tribal education departments, and nonprofits removes barriers to access. Providing sufficient tribal scholarship support removes significant financial barriers.

The National Native Scholarship Providers group, comprised of AISES, Native Forward Scholars, Indigenous Education Inc. (Cobell scholarships), and the College Fund have extensive resources about college access and funding for use by Tribes or tribal leaders.





## STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Approximately 13% of Native students in college attend TCUs. A similar percentage attend NASNTI, many of which are public institutions. The majority of Native students attend public institutions, including community colleges and state universities. While Native students are citizens of Tribes, they are also citizens of the state in which they reside. States are responsible for the education of their citizens, including tribal people. [NIEA National Landscape Analysis Report.pdf](#)<sup>24</sup>

Convening participants acknowledged that balancing the role of the federal government with opportunities for state action is critical. States have the opportunity to lead initiatives that increase Native students' postsecondary engagement and success when there are political forces at play at the national level that may not be as receptive to equity initiatives.

To that end, the convening participants identified areas where Native students access college and succeed and where state policy and legislation can create further success.

### **Tuition Supports**

Policies surrounding [state tuition waivers](#) for Native students vary across the United States. Through Native American tuition waiver programs, gap funding is provided for students who do not have full funding to enroll in a specific educational institution.<sup>25</sup> State-level programs that offer tuition waivers for Native students require students to provide documentation of tribal enrollment in a federally recognized Tribe as well as proof of residence from that state. Some institutions provide waivers, scholarships, or reduced tuition for either in-state or out-of-state Native students.<sup>26</sup>

Not all Native students have access to tuition waivers. These waivers don't exist in every state, locking out students who reside in states without them. In other cases, students may face barriers like blood quantum or descendance rules that prevent them from enrolling in their Tribe, or their Tribe may not have federal or state recognition. These barriers create significant financial obstacles for some Native students to access equal educational

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<sup>24</sup> NIEA (n.d)

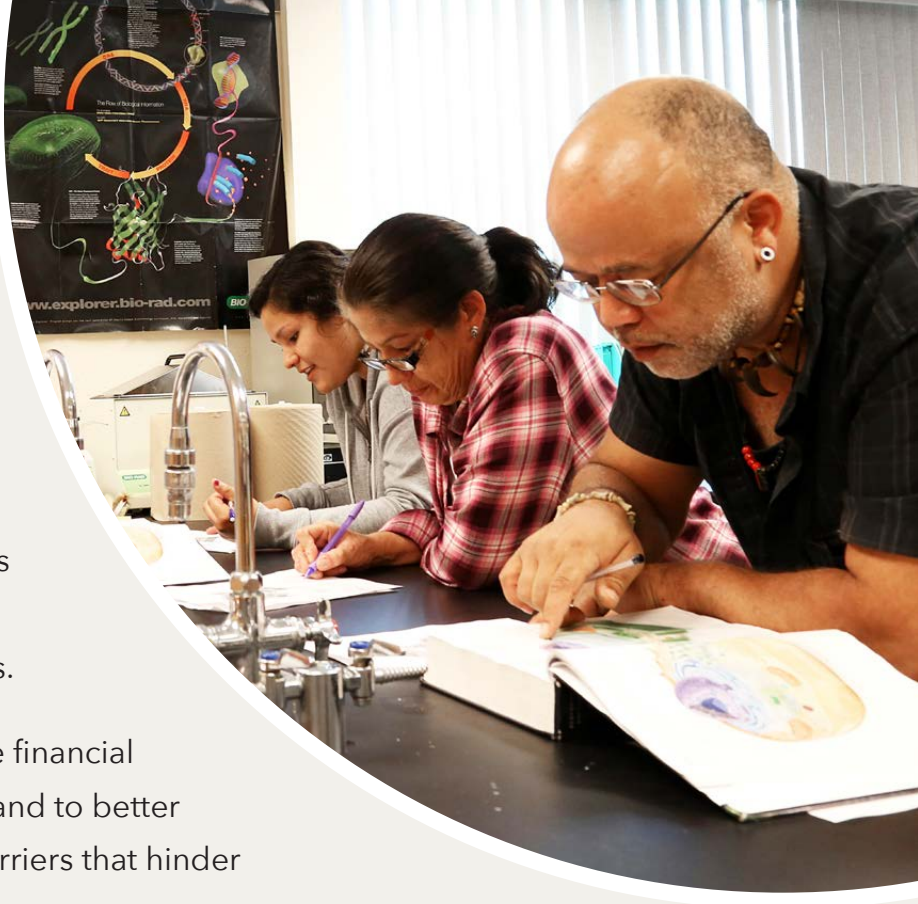
<sup>25</sup> Minthorn et al. (2023)

<sup>26</sup> Pate (2023)

opportunities. While determination of tribal citizenship is the right of Tribes based on their status as sovereigns, actions could be taken by scholarship providers, state institutions, and even state and federal policy makers to expand eligibility practices such as expansion of descendency requirements.

These efforts are necessary to relieve the financial burden for low-income Native students and to better address the financial inequalities and barriers that hinder Native student success.

Additionally, access to scholarships and tuition waivers can help increase enrollment and retention rates and allow Native students to pursue undergraduate education and beyond. Furthermore, these types of policies can help raise awareness and promote advocacy to address how broader policy can be better implemented to create inclusive learning environments for Native students. Additional efforts could include states and educational institutions fostering better relationships with Tribes, particularly those with historical, or modern, ties to the institution or local region.



## **Economic and Social Policy**

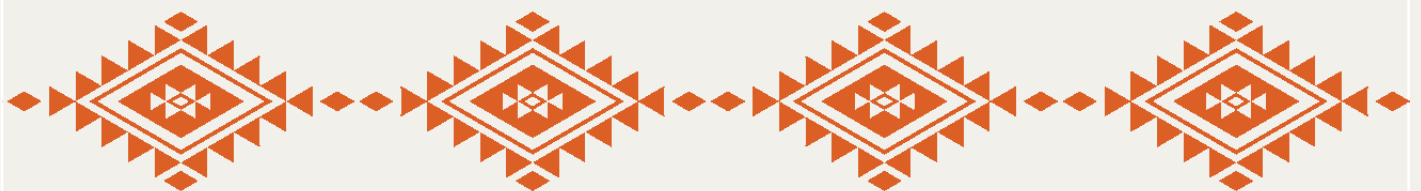
By including Tribes and tribal organizations, including TCUs, in state economic and social initiatives, states can have a greater impact on the well-being of the communities they serve. For example, in the state of North Dakota, there is a strong partnership between the North Dakota Tribal College System, North Dakota colleges and universities, private industry, and the state government to implement a comprehensive apprenticeship program that improves tribal citizens' pathways to employment.

## **Research and Data Sovereignty**

State agencies such as health and human services, education, and labor departments can ensure that Tribes are always included in any research opportunities early in the development of that research and can be responsive to tribally-initiated research in a timely and respectful manner. Research, whether for human or non-human subject matter, should always belong to the Tribes and be housed within the Tribes, which have the option to house data with partners.

## **Native Data Practices**

States can ensure that Native data is collected at the institutional level and aggregated at an appropriate level of detail to inform better decision-making for both institutions and Tribes themselves. The State Higher Education Executive Officers Organization ([SHEEO](#)) is a partner organization that can be leveraged to collaborate with Tribes on collection and analysis of education data. In 2020, SHEEO conducted a [study of equity in higher education](#), providing insights about the interrelatedness of student experiences, board governance, and research strategies.<sup>27</sup>



<sup>27</sup> State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (2023)

# CONCLUSION

Among the Lakota, and many other Tribes, there is a teaching that what is above—creation and the Creator—and what is below—human and non-human life on earth—are reflections of each other. Two of the strategic approaches to deepening our understanding of Native higher education policy are reflected in this report. Shared throughout the report is one approach—our journey—providing the framing for critical issues and recommendations. The other approach is the description of the landscape of Native higher education. That landscape reflected in this image shows the deep commitment to Indigenous values and relationships that is the foundation of our work. Our values are like the water in the river and lake, flowing through and around everything we do. Values are both the foundation of the work and are what we want the work to accomplish: culture, vision, and community. The mountains which reach into the sky toward the sun contain the many strategies that help Native students and their communities live prosperously. This circle of knowledge and relationships are the landscape in which Native students' higher education access and success is strengthened.

## *Landscape Scan of Native Higher Education*

### WHAT WE NEED...

*Funding*      *Inclusive Institutional Priorities*      *Communication*      *Holistic Support*      *Data Capacity and Accuracy*  
*Understanding*      *Policy*      *Infrastructure*

### BARRIERS...

*History and Disconnection in Tribal, State, and Federal Policies*

### WHAT WE HAVE

*Culture*      *Relationships*      *Vision*  
*Community*      *Voice*      *Trust Obligations*      *Love*



## LEARN MORE

**Click and Learn** Explore a curated collection of recommended readings aimed at enhancing your understanding of the complex landscape of Native higher education. These resources will not only broaden your perspective but highlight the unique challenges faced by Native communities in education.

### Click on any article to learn more.

- ◆ [National Native Tuition Waiver Study](#)
- ◆ [Creating Visibility and Healthy Learning Environments for Natives in Higher Education](#)
- ◆ [Pushing for Transformative Policy Improvements that Deliver Equitable Value for All Students \(IHEP\)](#)
- ◆ [Our revised race standards still fall short for Indigenous Americans | The Hill](#)
- ◆ [Layers of Identity: Rethinking American Indian and Alaska Native \(AI/AN\) Data Collection in Higher Education](#)
- ◆ [Ensuring College Access and Success for American Indian/Alaska Native Students | The Campaign for College Opportunity](#)
- ◆ [Legislative Priorities | Michigan College Access Network](#)
- ◆ [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)
- ◆ [Factors Influencing American Indian and Alaska Native](#)
- ◆ [Bringing Visibility to the Needs and Interests of Indigenous](#)

## Appendix A: Native Higher Education Policy Convening Participants

| <b>NAME</b>                | <b>TITLE</b>   | <b>ORGANIZATION</b>   |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Aaron Smith                | Director of Major Gifts, Strategic Partnerships, and Grants Operations | American Indian College Fund                                      |
| Aderet Averick             | Assistant to the President's Office                                    | American Indian College Fund                                      |
| Ahniwake Rose              | VP Congressional and Federal Relations                                 | American Indian Higher Education Consortium                       |
| Amanda Tachine             | Assistant Professor  | Arizona State University  |
| Amy Leary                  | Executive Director   | Montana Post Secondary Educational Opportunities Council (MPSEOC) |
| Amy Weinstein              | Senior Vice President  | Advancing Indigenous People in STEM                               |
| Andrew Koricich            | Executive Director   | Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges                        |
| Angela McLean              | Director American Indian and Minority Achievement                      | Montana University System   |
| Anthony Fiano              | Assistant Director of VBAI   | Brookings Metro   |
| Ben Barrett                | Senior Program Manager   | Aspen Institute College Excellence Program                        |
| Bryan Cook                 | Director of Higher Education Policy                                    | Urban Institute   |
| Carrie Basgall             | Senior Manager, President's Office                                     | American Indian College Fund                                      |
| Cheryl Crazy Bull          | President and CEO  | American Indian College Fund                                      |
| Chris Nelson               | Associate Professor  | University of Denver  |
| Crystal LoudHawk-Hedgepeth | Sr. Program Officer-Research   | American Indian College Fund                                      |

| <b>NAME</b>             | <b>TITLE</b>   | <b>ORGANIZATION</b>                                   |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Cynthia Lindquist       | Consultant and Former President of                               | Cankdeska Cikana Community College                    |
| Cynthia Soto            | Program Administrator  | The Spencer Foundation                                |
| David Sanders           | Vice President for Research, Evaluation, and Faculty Development | American Indian College Fund                          |
| Deana Around Him        | Research Scholar   | Child Trends  |
| Dina Horwedel           | Sr. Director Public Education                                    | American Indian College Fund                          |
| Eleanor Eckerson Peters | Director of Research and Policy                                  | Institute for Higher Education Policy                 |
| Erin Griego             | Chief of Staff   | Native Forward Scholars Fund                          |
| Gabby Goodman           | Research Assistant   | Brookings Metro                                       |
| Hannah Stephens         | Research Assistant   | The Brookings Metro                                   |
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| Julia Wakeford          | Policy Director  | National Indian Education Association                 |
| Kevin Brown             | Ph.D. Student<br>Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College                | Arizona State University                              |
| Kim Dancy               | Associate Director   | Institute for Higher Education Policy                 |
| Lauren Bell             | Communications Associate   | Institute for Higher Education Policy                 |

| <b>NAME</b>             | <b>TITLE</b>                                      | <b>ORGANIZATION</b>                      |
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| Mamie Voight            | President   | Institute for Higher<br>Education Policy |
| Mayu Takeuchi           | Research Assistant                                | The Brookings Metro                      |
| Melissa Isaac           | Board Member                                      | Michigan College<br>Access Network       |
| Melissa Peterson        | Director of Equity and<br>Success Initiatives     | University of Kansas                     |
| Melvin Monette          | President and CEO                                 | The Cobell Scholarship                   |
| Nara Nayar              | Technical Assistance Consultant                   | American Institutes<br>for Research      |
| Natalie Youngbull       | Assistant Professor,<br>Higher Education          | University of Oklahoma                   |
| Nichole Prescott        | Assistant Vice Chancellor<br>for Academic Affairs | The University of Texas System           |
| Robert Maxim            | Fellow  | The Brookings Metro                      |
| Robin Minthorn          | Professor and Department Chair                    | University of Oklahoma                   |
| Rusty Creed Brown       | Deputy Director                                   | National Indian<br>Education Association |
| Sarah Reber             | Senior Fellow in Economic Studies                 | The Brookings Metro                      |
| Sedelta Oosahwee        | Senior Policy Analyst/Specialist                  | National Education Association           |
| Taylor Lucero           | Post-Baccalaureate Fellow                         | American Indian College Fund             |
| Tiffany Gusbeth         | Vice President, Student<br>Success Services       | American Indian College Fund             |
| Wil Del Pilar           | Sr. Vice President                                | The Education Trust                      |
| Yolanda Watson<br>Spiva | President   | Complete College America                 |



## **Appendix B: Native Higher Education Policy Convening: Methodology and Design**

The gathering utilized a mixed-methods approach to collecting data that facilitated discussions about the challenges in Native higher education. This approach included presentations from content experts, known as "Thunder Talks," as well as "Talking Circles" and Action-Oriented Teams. These activities took place in a "Rez Café" setting and involved the use of a journey board. Rez Café, similar to the World Café, is a collaborative discussion method that utilizes small and large group conversations to engage participants in exploring deeper discussions on a chosen topic, in this case, Native higher education.

Content expert presentations and Thunder Talks highlighted the future of Native higher education and the need to amplify Native voices. Participants engaged in "Talking Circles" around the subjects of student data, student access, Native student success, Native identity and affirmative action, advocacy, and the value of postsecondary education to Native students and communities, focused on specific questions to foster deep reflection and discussions.

The themes from the Thunder Talks guided these conversations, and key themes were recorded. The overarching themes centered around: Policy Organizations–Amplifying Native Visibility and Voice; Building Research and Policy; Practice and Policy Insights from Native Scholars.

Speakers and Thunder Talk subject matter experts were recorded either as audio or with written notes for accuracy. Action-Oriented Team sessions were conducted using Talking Circles held within a "Rez Café" to systematically gather data, with a designated recorder or facilitator at each table. Reflections from the roundtable discussions and the structured prompts from each circle's agenda were documented on adhesive notes by category and displayed to conduct an environmental scan of Native higher education. Representatives summarized critical points from their discussions, which were visually recorded.

Qualitative inductive thematic coding was performed to examine the data gathered through Thunder Talks, Talking Circles, and Action-Oriented Team circles facilitated via a "Rez Café" and Journey Board. Ultimately, this coding process captured key points (themes and categories) as observed across both days using the various activities for data gathering.

## **APPENDIX C:**

### *White Paper on Students for Fair Admissions (“SFFA”) and Indian College Admissions by Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP.*

## **RESOURCE LIST**

### **Organizations**

- ◆ American Indian Higher Education Consortium. URL: <https://www.aihec.org/>.
- ◆ National Congress of American Indians. URL: <https://www.ncai.org/>.
- ◆ National Indian Education Association. URL: <https://www.niea.org/>.
- ◆ State Higher Education Executive Officers Organization. URL: <https://sheeo.org/>.

### **Reports**

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