

# Preserving Culture and Planning for the Future

An Exploration of Student Experiences at Tribal Colleges





## Foreword

For American Indian and Alaska Native students, place is where kinship and history provide roots, where a relationship with creation is normal, and where identity is respected. Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) are such places.

In these places of strength and beauty, there are also incredible hardships—historical trauma, poverty, and isolation mean limited access to healthcare, housing, education, and transportation. In these places of deep cultural knowledge and spiritual practices, there are also many challenges—grief and loss, food insecurity, and shattered families.

The tribally controlled education represented by TCUs is restorative—bringing access to language, socialization, relationships, and indigenous knowledge that is inherently empowering to students and their families. It is knowledge that overcomes hardships and challenges. Because of TCUs and more support for Native students throughout higher education, over 14% of Native adults have a college degree.

This report provides a snapshot of the ways that students experience TCUs. This research also shows there is a gap—in order to increase the number of Native students who complete college, more students need support. With continued investments from tribal colleges and additional investments from outside the colleges, this gap can be narrowed and more students can succeed.

**Cheryl Crazy Bull**  
*President and CEO*  
American Indian College Fund



## Table of Contents

Tribal Colleges and Their Students	1
The Importance of Culture and Belonging Relationships	2
Relationships	4
Student Engagement	5
Challenges to Persistence	6
Financial Assistance	10
The Path Forward	12

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## Tribal Colleges and Their Students

Just over half a century ago, Diné College, originally named Navajo Community College, was established as the first tribally controlled college in the United States. Now, in 2019, over 30 other tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) are also creating important opportunities for the students they serve. Tribal colleges have at the heart of their missions a focus on preserving and honoring tribal culture—and also a commitment to improving the educational, social, and economic development of their communities.

According to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), TCUs “operate more than 75 campuses in 16 states ... and serve students from well more than 250 federally recognized Indian tribes.”<sup>1</sup> Many of the colleges are located on or near tribal lands in rural locations with little economic development.<sup>2</sup> Although not all students who attend tribal colleges are Native American,<sup>3</sup> the vast majority are.<sup>4</sup>

This report aims to share a narrative of students who attend tribal colleges.

Over 1,000 students across 25 tribal colleges responded to the 2017 Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*), which collects information from students about their experiences from the time they decide to enroll in college through the third week of their first term. Over 2,400 students across 22 tribal colleges responded to the 2018 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*), which gathers information from students in the spring term about their experiences throughout the academic year.

Where appropriate, tribal college students who responded to *SENSE* 2017 and *CCSSE* 2018 are compared with Native American students at non-tribal colleges who responded to the same surveys. The tribal college student experience is a unique one, which this comparison illustrates. Furthermore, based on responses to *SENSE* and *CCSSE*, students at tribal colleges are more likely than Native American students attending other colleges to be enrolled full-time and to be 25 years or older. And, in the case of *CCSSE* respondents, they are more likely to be female.

For a complete description of respondent characteristics and the full report methodology, visit [www.ccsse.org/SR2019](http://www.ccsse.org/SR2019).

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*“My sister graduated from here, and my brother graduated from here. For me, I’m proud to go to school here. It was made for us. I’m doing my best every day to make myself proud and my family proud.”*

-STUDENT

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## Mission and Vision<sup>5</sup>

“**Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College** offers a postsecondary education to honor the past, for those living in the present and dreaming the future, through a spirit of respect, cooperation, and unity.” (MN)

“The **Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College** mission is to provide Anishinaabe communities with post-secondary and continuing education while advancing the language, culture, and history of the Ojibwa.” (WI)

“The **College of the Muscogee Nation** is the institution of higher education for the Muscogee Creek Nation emphasizing native culture, values, language and self-determination. The College will provide a positive learning environment for tribal and non-tribal students as citizens of a tribal and global society supported by teaching excellence and will offer exemplary academic programs that meet student, tribal, and societal needs.” (OK)

“The College is committed to the preservation, perpetuation and protection of Crow culture and language, and respects the distinct bilingual and bicultural aspects of the Crow Indian community. **Little Big Horn College** is committed to the advancement of the Crow Indian family and community building.” (MT)

## The Importance of Culture and Belonging

After a review of tribal colleges’ mission and vision statements, it is clear that a preservation and perpetuation of culture is of paramount importance to these institutions. A recent publication asserts the following: “Given their culture-based missions, the characteristics that distinguish tribal colleges from other higher education institutions center on the ways Indigenous values and beliefs are reflected throughout the institution, particularly within the curriculum, program offerings, course content and design, and the pedagogies used by the faculty who teach within this context.”<sup>6</sup>

Special-focus items were added to the tribal colleges’ administrations of *SENSE* 2017 and *CCSSE* 2018, and the resulting data suggest that the colleges are successfully fulfilling their missions in underscoring the value of tribal identity.

When looking at *SENSE* data, it becomes clear that this work is not only happening, but is happening early. For instance, 73% (N=1,033) of entering tribal college students report that their college’s focus on native language and culture improves their self-image/confidence *a lot* or *a moderate amount*.

Additionally, 60% (N=2,268) of *CCSSE* tribal college respondents say that their college experience has developed their ability to understand, communicate, and effectively interact with their tribe *a lot* or *a moderate amount*.

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*“Language is part of who we are. Culture. It’s all in our blood, so it’s not necessarily learning everything new. It’s just remembering who we are ... and where we come from and being able to give our kids that.”*

-STUDENT

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SENSE respondents also overwhelmingly agree that their college takes a holistic approach to their development, helps them develop Native American values, and engenders a sense of belonging. When students in the spring term were asked to report on CCSSE about the very same things, the responses were equivalent or higher, suggesting that while this concentration on culture and a sense of belonging happens early, it also persists throughout students' time at the college.

Only 10% of tribal college students responding to CCSSE (N=2,181) report being fluent in a Native American language, but 45% report that they intend to gain fluency while attending college, an opportunity they likely would not have at a non-tribal institution—and one that will ensure that their language survives and will be passed on to future generations.

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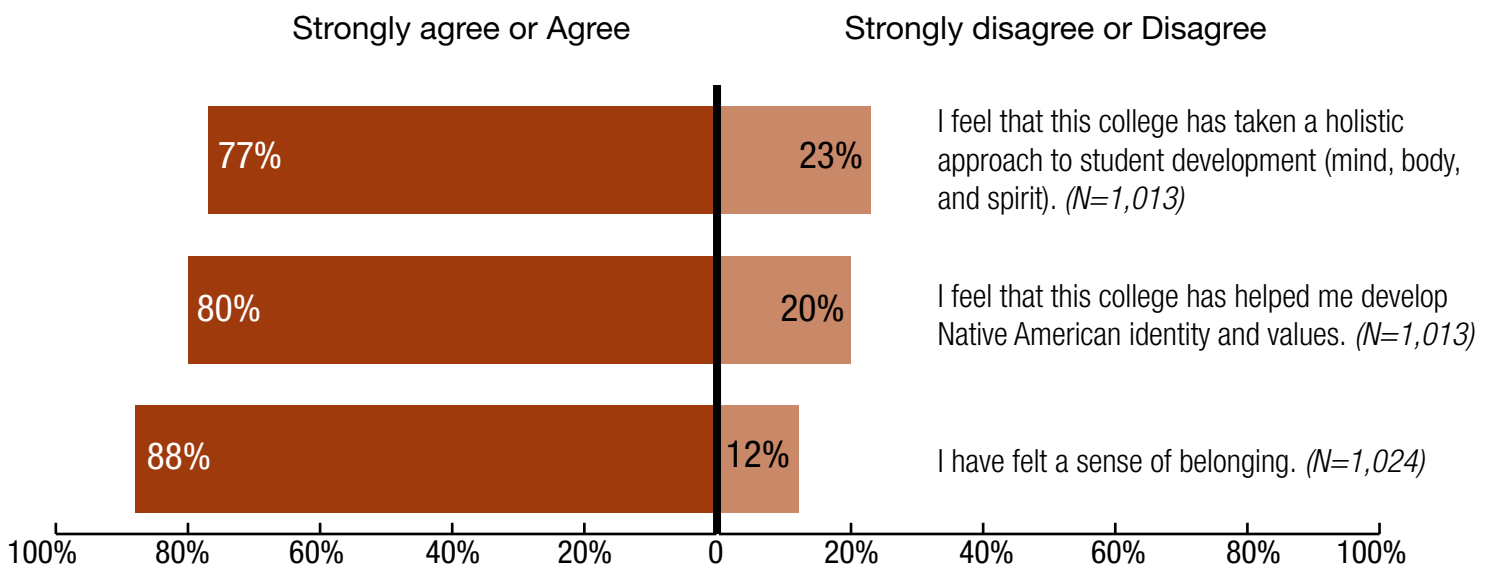
*"I find it very important, not only to gain credit for the basic subjects such as math, science, history, and the usual academic courses like that, but to actually learn about my own self-identity of my history, my ancestors' teachings, and the Navajo philosophy."*

-STUDENT

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## Students' Experiences With Culture and Belonging

Within a class or through another experience at this college ...



Source: SENSE 2017 (Tribal College Students)



## Relationships

The more actively engaged students are—with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter they are studying—the more likely they are to persist. When exploring tribal college students’ responses to survey items about their relationships with staff members, instructors, and other students, they are more likely than Native American students attending non-tribal colleges to agree that their connections with others are strong.

- **On relationships with staff members (not instructors):** 76% (N=1,056) of tribal college students report that a college staff member learned their name in the first three weeks of class, compared to 56% (N=1,753) of Native American students at non-tribal colleges.

Source: SENSE 2017

- **On relationships with instructors:** When tribal college students in the spring term were asked about their interactions with instructors outside of class, 70% (N=2,387) said they had discussed ideas from their readings or classes at least some of the time, compared to 60% (N=8,774) of Native American students at non-tribal colleges.

Source: CCSSE 2018

- **On relationships with other students:** 48% (N=2,367) of tribal college students report that their college emphasizes providing them the support to thrive socially *quite a bit* or *very much* compared to 36% (N=8,754) of Native American students at non-tribal colleges.

Source: CCSSE 2018



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*“We’re a person in the classroom, and we’re not a number on a roster here. It’s very personal. We get to be very close with everybody, and we want to see each other achieve our goals.”*

-STUDENT

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*“You feel like there’s already a family here. I think it’s not like going to any other college or university where you’re in the minority. Over here it’s you’re in the majority, and you feel more welcome.”*

-STAFF MEMBER

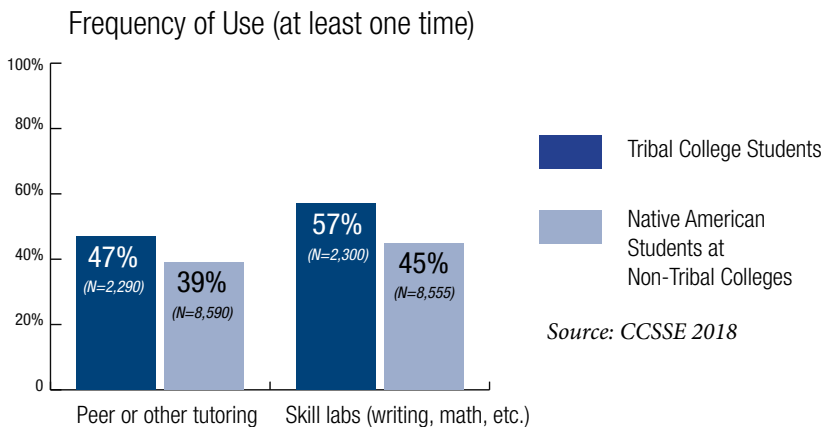
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## Student Engagement

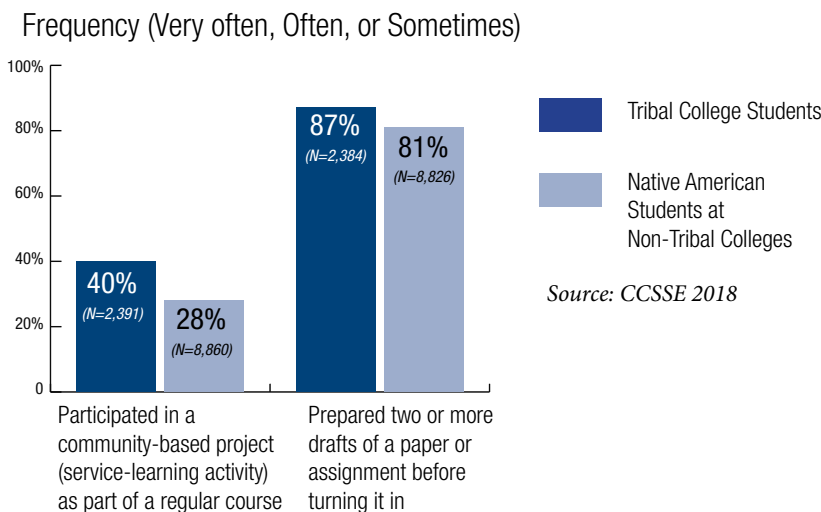
In several areas, tribal college students report behaviors of highly engaged students. In fact, CCSSE respondents at tribal colleges are more likely to take advantage of tutoring services and skill labs than their non-tribal college peers; they are also more likely to participate in service-learning activities and prepare multiple drafts of papers.

While tribal college students report positive engagement behaviors, many are also enrolled in developmental classes. According to AIHEC, 67% of first-time entering tribal college students place into developmental math, 65% into developmental writing, and 61% into developmental reading.<sup>7</sup> Although tribal college students use tutoring services and skill labs at a higher rate than the comparison group, there is a gap between the need indicated by the percentage of students placing into developmental courses and the number of students using support services—and there is room for improvement in closing that gap.



*“I was struggling with math as well. I had to go to the math lab. They were super helpful. I went from a C to an A in that class, ending with an A. I was in tears of happiness.”*

-STUDENT



*“I do enjoy the ones where the classes are more challenging and the teachers. You turn in what you think is a good paper, and they’re like, ‘No, you can probably do a little bit better.’ ... Then you actually write a better paper because of it too.”*

-STUDENT



## Challenges to Persistence

Nationally, many community college students face challenges and have external commitments: Over a third are first-generation college students, and with the average age being 28, many work and have dependents who rely on them for their care.<sup>8</sup> Challenges such as these can be cause for students not only to miss class or turn in assignments late, but ultimately to withdraw from college.

Like the national population of community college students, tribal college students also face challenges. Tribal colleges are often in quite rural locations; therefore, unreliable transportation and a lack of Internet services can present issues for students. Additionally, tribal college students report struggling to always afford food. *CCSSE* and *SENSE* data illustrate that these students are more likely to have children living with them who depend on them for their care than the comparison group, but are less likely to work for pay.

What follows is a discussion of some of the hardships experienced by tribal college students that might cause them to withdraw from college. Although entering tribal college students responding to *SENSE* also report facing these challenges, they are slightly more pronounced for the students responding to *CCSSE* in the spring term. Many tribal colleges have programs in place to help alleviate these challenges.

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*“Financial employment is very limited here within our nation. We have very small communities. The majority of the communities here on the reservation only have one store, one gas station, one school, and one chapter house.”*

-STUDENT

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## Distance and Transportation

Over one-third of tribal college students report that the distance between their home and the college could cause them to withdraw and almost half report that a lack of reliable transportation could be a factor for withdrawing. Several tribal college students mentioned in focus groups with Center staff that poor road conditions in the winter could make it difficult for them to get to class.

38%

of students indicated that the distance between the college and home could be a cause for withdrawal from class or the college  
(N=2,093)



49%

of students indicated that a lack of reliable transportation could be a cause for withdrawal from class or the college  
(N=2,101)

Source: *CCSSE 2018 (Tribal College Students)*





*“The college here offers transportation. I live 40 minutes away from campus. The transportation is free. I didn’t know about it the first year, so I spent half my savings on gas back and forth, two-hour drive every day. When I found out that they had transportation provided, it helped out a lot.”*

-STUDENT

Salish Kootenai College (SKC) in Montana contracts with its Tribal Transit system to provide bus service free of charge for all of its students. The college formerly offered a van service for its students, but it became too expensive, so now it partners with the Tribe and its transportation system for a very reasonable fee.

The bus travels from the northern and southern boundaries of the reservation to the college five days a week, picking up students every morning and returning them to their communities every evening. Having access to reliable transportation without having to worry about inclement weather, having sufficient gas, or having car maintenance issues has provided relief to SKC’s students.



## The Digital Divide

Almost half of spring term students report that having limited access to a computer or electronic device at home or having limited access to the Internet at home could cause them to withdraw. The digital divide is a reality many tribal college students face. According to a recent Federal Communications Commission report, in 2016, over one-third of Americans living on tribal lands lacked broadband access.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps in an effort to cope with these challenges, tribal college students are more likely to use the computer labs at their colleges than their non-tribal college peers. Sixty-nine percent (N=2,291) of tribal college students responding to CCSSE report using the computer lab at their college two or more times during the academic year, while 55% (N=8,541) of Native American students at non-tribal colleges report using it at least twice.

Tribal college students are also taking advantage of this service early: 70% (N=1,007) of entering tribal college students report using the computer lab within the first three weeks of class, compared to 58% (N=1,666) of Native American students at non-tribal colleges.

49%

of students indicated that having limited access to a computer or electronic device at home could be a cause for withdrawal from class or the college  
(N=2,116)



49%

of students indicated that having limited access to the Internet at home could be a cause for withdrawal from class or the college  
(N=2,114)

Source: CCSSE 2018 (Tribal College Students)

*“I moved into a pretty old house. When I tried to get Internet set up at my house, they told me that they tried to install in 2014, and that they were unable to. I got it set up, but for a couple few weeks there, I was without Internet. It’s almost impossible to be a student and not be able to go home and check your e-mail because almost all of us are bringing our work home with us.”*

-STUDENT



## Food Insecurity

According to a 2018 study, “Recent estimates suggest that at least 20% of 2-year college students have very low levels of food security.” The authors define very low levels of food security as “reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.”<sup>10</sup> Tribal college student responses to CCSSE show a similar pattern.

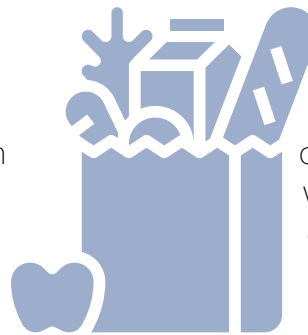
In an effort to keep students on campus between classes, Stone Child College in Montana provides healthy snacks at the Art Raining Bird Learning Center. While there, students can also secure a tutor and use one of the 10 computers available. The college is in the process of setting up a food pantry and a clothing bank in the basement of the Learning Center—both of which will be stocked by donations from the staff and community.

The college also starts each week with an information-sharing lunch for students, faculty, and staff called Monday Drum. The event is held in the foyer of the main academic building and begins with announcements of things like upcoming campus events and scholarship opportunities. A student then shares a Native song, and those who are gathered share a meal that has been sponsored and prepared by an ad-hoc committee or department.



# 34%

of students worried within the past 12 months whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more  
(N=2,129)



# 25%

of students ran out of food within the past 12 months and didn't have money to get more  
(N=2,151)

Source: CCSSE 2018 (Tribal College Students)

*“I was pushed to come to college because I was living in my car with my kids, and it was a survival thing ... The school was just amazing when I walked in and asked for help ... They were amazing with getting me set up with financial resources or financial aid. Student services were amazing at getting me in a house with my kids. From that moment on, we became very stable, and ... it was the best decision that I’ve ever made.”*

-STUDENT

*“I think the students here, for the most part, come with a strong desire to make something better for themselves ... The fact that they’re just here, given what they’ve been through, shows a lot. The opportunity and the challenge for us [is] to take that resiliency they have in their everyday life and translate that to academics and help them achieve that better life.”*

-FACULTY MEMBER



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*“They had a bunch of information for us ... if we needed food assistance, transportation costs, stuff like that. When I first got here ... I had all these pamphlets and if you need to go talk to somebody, here’s their number. It was loaded with a lot of information [about] what was on campus and what we had available for us as students.”*

**-STUDENT**

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Even though [Saginaw Chippewa Tribal College](#) (SCTC) in Michigan is located in a semi-urban area and most students live within a 15-mile radius, they face similar challenges as other tribal college students across the country. For some, one of those challenges is food insecurity. SCTC does not have a formal food service program or kitchen, yet staff members prepare food for students by using hot plates, crock-pots, and electric frying pans. They also bring in lunches like soup, sandwiches, and Indian tacos. Additionally, some faculty who teach evening classes provide food for students who have left work and come directly to class. Students who are able also bring in food for their classes. Moreover, the college has nonperishable nutritious snacks on hand for students. With this concerted effort, on most days students have some type of sustenance offered. The college is hopeful that this attempt to meet a basic need of their students will impact their academic success.





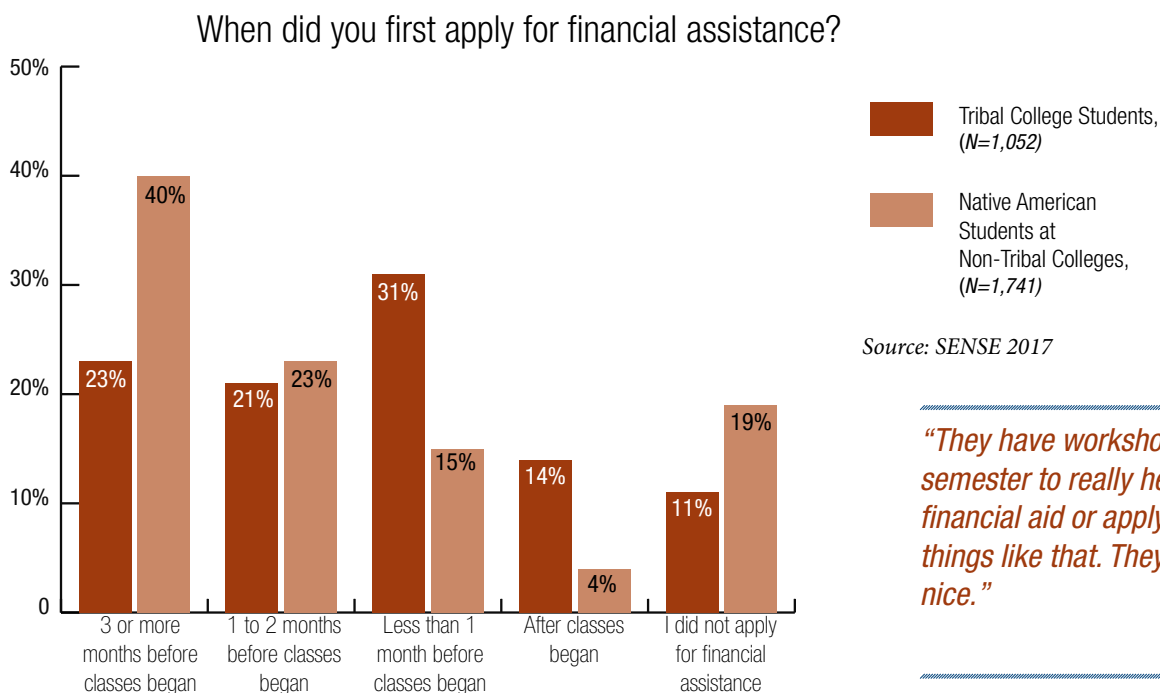
## Financial Assistance

Tribal colleges are more affordable than many other higher education institutions, but most of their students still rely on financial aid to attend. In fact, 78% rely on Pell Grants to help pay for college.<sup>11</sup> Yet, even with grants and lower tuition, there is often still not enough money for college. According to AIHEC, “the amount of aid available, although significant, is inadequate to meet the needs of students and families living on reservations where poverty is high and unemployment rates range from 50–70 percent or higher.”<sup>12</sup>

Seventy percent (N=1,052) of entering tribal college students report that their college provides adequate information about financial assistance, and most students apply for aid, but they generally apply for and receive aid later than the comparison group. Since financial issues seem to be a likely cause for withdrawal for some tribal college students, this may be an area for further exploration.

- **Who applies for financial assistance:** Almost **90%** (N=1,052) of entering tribal college students apply for financial assistance.
- **When do they apply for financial assistance:** **31%** of entering tribal college students apply less than a month before classes begin, and **14%** apply after classes begin. (N=1,052)
- **When do they receive financial assistance:** Among entering tribal college students who report applying for financial assistance, only **40%** (N=911) receive funds before classes begin, compared to **67%** (N=1,373) of the comparison group.

Source: SENSE 2017

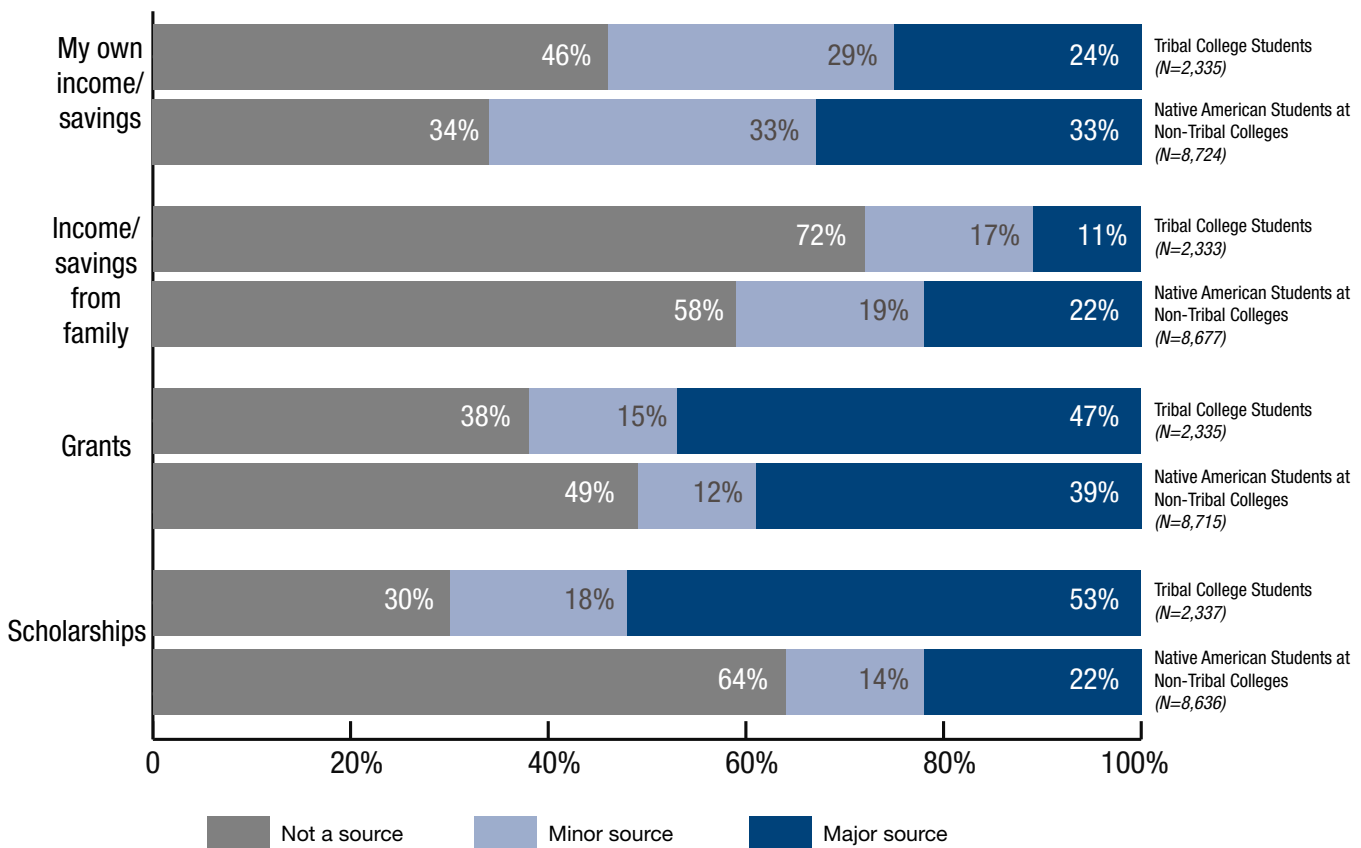


*“They have workshops throughout the semester to really help students learn about financial aid or applying for scholarships and things like that. They really do that, which is nice.”*

-STUDENT

Not only is *when* tribal college students apply for financial assistance different than Native American students at non-tribal colleges, what they apply for and how they pay for college is also different. Nonprofit organizations such as the American Indian College Fund have long worked to empower Native American students to start and stay in college through scholarship funds and other support services. Correspondingly, tribal college students report being more likely to use grants and scholarships to pay for their college expenses and less likely to use their own income, income from family, or loans.<sup>13</sup>

Which of the following sources are you using to pay for tuition at this college?



Source: CCSSE 2018; Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

*“I think that filling out the financial aid ... forms for first-time college students can be overwhelming ... and even [for] some of the adults in their life that are trying to help them, having never done it themselves. But I feel that on campus, there are a lot of resources available to help students get through that part of it. I also know that the scholarship department works very hard to dispense that information to students that these scholarships are available.”*

-FACULTY MEMBER

Through the American Indian College Fund's Native Pathways to College Program, Native students and families receive assistance creating and navigating a path to college. Once students are in college, the program gives them training and tools to earn an associate degree and then to choose a four-year institution where they can earn a bachelor's degree.

Under the High School Admissions Pathway, students receive one-on-one coaching and participate in workshops to prepare them for college. They also receive opportunities to visit campuses, participate in college fairs, and get valuable information about tuition, financial aid, and the admissions process.

Tribal college students graduating with an associate degree are also eligible to participate in the Tribal College Transfer Pathway. Students attend personal coaching sessions and receive assistance in applying to higher education institutions with competitive admissions requirements. They receive valuable information about how to choose an institution that provides Native students with additional scholarships, tuition-waivers, and in-state tuition. They also learn which schools offer a comfortable and welcoming environment for Native students, which is essential to their academic and emotional well-being.



## The Path Forward

Center focus group findings and previous research suggest that many Native American students are attending college as representatives for their entire family and for their tribe.<sup>14</sup> The success of tribal college students will undoubtedly bolster the economic mobility of their families and the economic development of their communities. A study from 2015 found that for every dollar tribal college students invest in their education, there is a return of \$4.10 in higher future income, or an annual rate of return of 16.6%. Furthermore, the report found that “for every dollar society invests in an education from TCUs, an average of \$5.20 in benefits will accrue to the U.S. over the course of the students’ careers.”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, tribal colleges’ focus on preserving culture and native language will ensure that the customs and traditions of the past will live on and flourish for generations to come.

Since Diné College was established by the Navajo Nation just over 50 years ago, tribal colleges have positively influenced the lives of countless students and their families. Accordingly, the vital work of tribal colleges and the challenges their students encounter deserve continued exploration and the attention of the larger field of higher education.

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*“There’s motivation as far as earning your education, earning a degree. Then when you get your degree, you can help your people out too.”*

-STUDENT



## Endnotes

1. American Indian Higher Education Consortium: Who We Serve. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.aihec.org/who-we-serve/>
2. His Horse is Thunder, D. (2012). *Breaking through tribal colleges and universities*. Retrieved from <http://www.aihec.org/our-stories/docs/reports/BreakingThrough.pdf>
3. For purposes of this report, students identifying as *American Indian or Alaska Native/American Indian or Native American* on the CCSSE and SENSE surveys are referred to as "Native American."
4. In the 2016–2017 academic year, 86% of students attending tribal colleges were American Indian. (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [2017] "AIHEC AIMS 2017 Annual Report" [unpublished dataset]). Because many tribal colleges are in quite rural locations with few institutions of higher education available, a varying percentage of non-Native students also attend them.
5. Mission and vision statements taken from colleges' websites.
6. Bull, C. C., & Guillory, J. (2018). Revolution in higher education: Identity & cultural beliefs inspire tribal colleges & universities. *Daedalus*, 147(2), 95–105.
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13. Tribal colleges generally do not participate in the federal student loan program, but rather encourage students to apply for types of aid that do not require repayment. (American Indian Higher Education Consortium. [2012]. *2009–2010 AIHEC AIMS Fact book*. Retrieved from [http://www.aihec.org/our-stories/docs/reports/AIHEC\\_AIMSreport\\_May2012.pdf](http://www.aihec.org/our-stories/docs/reports/AIHEC_AIMSreport_May2012.pdf)).
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15. Economic Modeling Specialists Intl. (2015). *The economic value of American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Colleges & Universities: An analysis of the economic impact and return on investment of education*. Retrieved from [www.aihec.org/our-stories/docs/reports/EconomicValue-AIAN-TCUs.pdf](http://www.aihec.org/our-stories/docs/reports/EconomicValue-AIAN-TCUs.pdf)

### The Center would like to extend a very special thanks to the tribal colleges that participated in this project.

To see the complete list of colleges, visit [www.ccsse.org/initiatives](http://www.ccsse.org/initiatives).

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For a list of Center National Advisory Board members, Center member colleges, and Center staff, visit [www.ccsse.org](http://www.ccsse.org).

# Preserving Culture and Planning for the Future

An Exploration of Student Experiences at Tribal Colleges



*“We may not know the future, but we can prepare our students to take it head-on with knowledge, courage, and an understanding of who they are.”*

*-Charles “Monty” Roessel  
President, Diné College*



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