

## Tribally Controlled Colleges

by  
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### A Brief History of Indian Education and the Need for Tribally Controlled Colleges

American Indians have a long history of attendance at colleges and universities in the United States. In 1665, an Algonquian Indian named Caleb Cheeshateaumuck graduated from Harvard College. In addition to speaking his native language and the English language, Cheeshateaumuck was fluent in Latin and Greek. Cheeshateaumuck not only fulfilled Harvard College's academic requirements, he exceeded them (Wright, 1991). Cheeshateaumuck died of an unknown illness to which he had no immunity shortly after he graduated from Harvard College. According to Wright (1991), Cheeshateaumuck's death was ironic in that it exemplified American Indians' ability to succeed in mainstream educational systems, yet the inability of many American Indians to overcome other barriers that came with European occupation such as diseases, inconsistent and oppressive social policies, cultural intolerance, and racial discrimination.

Throughout the history of the United States, government officials' treatment of American Indians changed often and significantly (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 1995). At times, government officials treated American Indians with a great deal of respect and at other times were brutally intolerant. Throughout much of our country's history, government officials attempted to assimilate American Indians into the mainstream of society by cutting their hair, not allowing them to speak their native languages, and indoctrinating them into Christianity. Most government officials believed American Indians were "under-developed" because they did not attempt to master the natural environment, but rather to co-exist with it (Tozer et al., 1995). The main method used by government officials to assimilate American Indians was the development of government boarding schools (Fries, 1987).

Despite early examples of American Indians completing degrees and gaining increased access to post-secondary institutions, it was not until the late 1960s that American Indians began entering institutions of higher education in significant numbers (Fries, 1987). American Indians began attending colleges and universities for a variety of reasons, most notably because they realized that education was a vehicle capable of transcending them out of the poor socio-economic conditions in which many lived.

Arizona State University began offering courses in American Indian culture in 1954 (Guyette & Heth, 1985), but very few institutions offered American Indian related classes until the 1970s. American Indian history, language, culture, and "ways of being" were simply not a priority for the vast majority of post-secondary institutions in the United States until relatively recent times.

Two major pieces of legislation were passed in the 1970s that helped fuel American Indians' desire to enter institutions of higher education: The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (P.L. 93-638) and the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-471). Tribal colleges were a direct response to the largely unsuccessful educational experiences many American Indians had in mainstream schools nationwide (Wright, 1991).

Dr. Will Antell (Ojibwe) and Dr. Gerald Gipp (Lakota) were among the first cadre of well educated American Indian leaders to emerge out of the self-determination era that made significant and lasting contributions to "Indian Education" nationwide. After the passage of the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978, higher educations for American Indians in large numbers became a reality. Mainstream colleges and universities started to take notice that American Indians were entering post-secondary schools in larger numbers and began to recruit them with scholarships and more appropriate course offerings. Bemidji State University and the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities both established "American Indian Studies" programs in the fall of 1969 which were the ones established in Minnesota. Bemidji State University also established an "Ojibwe Language Program" in 1971, which was the first one in the State of Minnesota.

With the establishment of tribally controlled colleges in the 1970s, American Indians were becoming counselors, social workers, nurses, teachers, businessmen and businesswomen, and entrepreneurs. Many American Indians continued their educations after they graduated from tribal college and became doctors, lawyers, college professors and administrators. American Indian women in education played a huge role in the progress American Indian educators made during the 1970s. Dr. Rosemary Christensen (Chippewa) was among one of the first national education leaders. Many successful American Indian women educators learned techniques for manipulating the power structure by building coalitions. These leaders identified strongly with their ethnicity and the results were impressive (Sullivan, 2004).

### The Value of Tribally Controlled Colleges

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) is the umbrella organization that oversees the 38 tribal colleges and universities in the United States. AIHEC is the collective spirit and unifying voice of our nation's tribal colleges and universities. Thirty-seven tribal colleges and universities in the United States and one tribal college in Canada, collectively are the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. According to AIHEC staff, AIHEC provides leadership and influences public policy on American Indian higher education issues through advocacy, research, and program initiatives; promotes and strengthens indigenous languages, cultures, communities, and tribal nations; and through its unique position, serves member institutions and emerging tribal colleges and universities.

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium staff that are located in Washington, DC are excellent at what they do. The current President/CEO of AIHEC is Carrie Billie. Like her predecessor before her (Dr. Jerry Gipp), AIHEC is well managed and extremely helpful to all the tribal colleges and universities in the system. Because the AIHEC staff are well trained, well qualified, and well connected, the tribal colleges and universities nationwide have been able to make major strides forward in serving their students and their communities.

To offer transferable credits, each and every tribal college and university must be accredited. Most tribal colleges and universities have been accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (A Commission of the North Central Association) out of Chicago, Illinois. To be accredited, institutions of higher education must meet many standards set forth by the Higher Learning Commission. A few examples include: Having a steady revenue source, qualified staff, qualified faculty, a steady administration, a library, approved courses, approved degrees, etc. By earning accreditation, each tribal college and university is recognized nationally as an institution that has certificates, diplomas and degrees that meet the standards of other accredited institutions of higher education throughout the United States. This is a major accomplishment for any institution of higher education and extremely important to tribal colleges and universities that serve American Indian students in some of the most rural areas of the country.

The first eight tribal colleges in the United States were established in the 1970s. They started out relatively small serving a relatively small student population. Fast forward to 2014 and one will discover that there are now 38 tribal colleges and universities in the United States serving over 88,000 students. According to AIHEC (AIHEC Board of Directors Meeting, July 23-25, 2014) tribal colleges and universities provide access to higher education to over 80% of Indian Country (American Indian reservations and communities); all tribal colleges and universities offer associate degree programs; 13 tribal colleges and universities offer baccalaureate degree programs; two tribally controlled universities offer master's degree programs; more than half of the federally recognized tribes in the United States are represented in tribal college and university enrollments; and 77% of tribal college and university graduates earned degrees, while 20% earned certificates. According to AIHEC, it is estimated that approximately 20% of all American Indian students in the United States that attend a post-secondary institution is enrolled in a tribal college or university. These are enormous numbers for an underserved ethnic population.

Two of the main reasons so many American Indians attend tribal colleges and universities are (1) tribal colleges and universities offer the history, language and culture of the tribal communities they serve as a central element for earning a degree; and (2) tribal colleges and universities are located on or close to American Indian reservations and large American Indian populated communities. According to a survey conducted in 2011-2012 titled "Retention Factors of American Indians Students in Post-Secondary Schools", many American Indian students enrolled in tribal colleges and universities because mainstream schools did not take American Indian histories, languages, cultures or "ways of being" seriously (Day, 2012).

### Leech Lake Tribal College

Leech Lake Tribal College is located in northern Minnesota on the Leech Lake Reservation. The student headcount of the college was approximately 340 in academic year 2013-2014. Approximately 90% of the student population are tribally enrolled American Indians. The Mission Statement for the college is as follows:

“Leech Lake Tribal College provides quality  
higher education grounded in Anishinaabe values.”

The college’s Vision Statement is as follows:

“To be recognized as a center of academic excellence  
that advances the Anishinaabe worldview  
and empowers life-long learners who are  
fully engaged citizens, stewards, and leaders.”

Leech Lake Tribal College’s Mission Statement and Vision Statement are very clear in that they are concentrating on the history, language and culture of the Anishinaabeg people that reside in the Upper Great Lakes area of the United States which includes Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and the southern part of Canada, but especially the Anishinaabeg people of northern Minnesota. Many tribal colleges and universities in the United States have similar Mission Statements and Vision Statements that represent the tribal communities they serve.

The Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education (Volume 22, No. 2, Winter 2010) has some excellent articles about tribal colleges and universities’ successes and accomplishments in Montana. In the article titled “Caring, Sharing in the Big Sky” (Worley, 2010), Worley writes about some of the tribal colleges in Montana and the impressive initiatives they are working on.

Dr. David Yarlott (President, Little Big Horn College) elaborates on how he and his staff established a leadership and mentoring program aimed at administrators and students so they would be ready to lead when their people needed them (Worley, 2010). Among other things, the program is built around leadership skills, character building, and public speaking. All essential elements to successfully lead the people you serve and much needed in all American Indian communities nationwide.

Dr. Richard Littlebear (President, Chief Dull Knife College) talked about the “Northern Cheyenne Reading and Writing Project” that is designed to save and strengthen the Cheyenne language, which in turn will strengthen Cheyenne culture (Worley, 2010). Many American Indian languages in the United States are facing extinction. Many indigenous languages have words and phrases that do not have an English translation. If we lose our languages, we will lose our

ability to conduct many of our ceremonies. Tribal colleges and universities are leading the way in revitalizing our indigenous languages, and consequently, preserving our cultures. It can be

argued that saving our languages and cultures is the greatest benefit tribal colleges and universities are making for American Indian people throughout the country.

Carole Falcon-Chandler (President, Fort Belknap College, now called Aaniiih Nakoda College) speaks about the college's two main areas of concentration: culture and technology and how they can be successfully combined to allow students to receive a high quality education and yet retain the beautiful Aaniin and Nakoda cultures. The college is also proud of the KGVA radio station they operate. It is the only Native radio station in Montana in 2010 (Worley, 2010).

Fort Peck Community College's President in 2010 was the legendary Dr. James Shanley. Dr. Shanley was the founding President of Little Big Horn College and the President of Fort Peck Community College since 1984. Fort Peck Community College has increased their efforts in agriculture, health & wellness, and K-12 outreach initiatives. Fort Peck Community College's efforts in health & wellness are largely based on prevention which many tribes and health care organizations do not concentrate on (Worley, 2010) Other tribal colleges and universities have wellness centers such as Fort Peck Community College's wellness center and they all serve a much needed role in our communities.

In September 2014, Leech Lake Tribal College will become a "smoke-free" institution. There will be absolutely no smoking anywhere on campus grounds. The only exception will be for the traditional pipe ceremonies our people have conducted for centuries. During the 2013-2014 academic year, we conducted smoke-free educational programs preparing students, and some employees for the smoke-free environment that will be enforced. In the spring of 2015, the college will also plant and cultivate "asemaa", the traditional tobacco that our ancestors used for hundreds of years which does not contain the hundreds of addicting chemicals that store-bought tobacco contains.

According to a study conducted by the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe (AICTP, 2012), 16% of all Americans smoke, but 79% of all American Indian adults smoke. The survey went on to say that 54% of the smokers in this survey wanted to quit smoking. Given this data, it is not difficult to understand why so many American Indian people die so early in life compared to non-Indians. Diabetes is rampant on American Indian reservations with smoking and eating fast foods huge contributors. Tribal colleges and universities can lead the way in educating our communities about "mino-bimaadiz" (good health). Leech Lake Tribal College's Wellness Center and the college's Board of Trustees are leading the way in this prevention initiative.

#### Tribal Colleges and the K-12 System

Leech Lake Tribal College, like many other tribal colleges and universities in the country, offer college credits to junior and senior high school students that demonstrate high academic

ability. When the appropriate articulation agreements can be reached, an accredited college can offer enough credits to high school students where they can literally graduate from high school and a two-year college on the same day. Offering college credits to high school students is not a new practice, but decades old. For high achieving students that know they are going to college after high school, this is an opportunity they should definitely take advantage of. In a recent conversation with Joe Nathan (Executive Director, Center for School Change, Minneapolis, August, 2014), Joe states that “some high school students who are bored, and thus not doing well in high school, do very well in college. These students like the challenge and the freedom they find on college campuses.” Considering the high cost of attending colleges and universities today, taking advantage of college credits in high school can save a student thousands of dollars as they earn their college degree.

During the “Great Recession” that started in the United States in 2008, many people lost their income and jobs. Many of these people went back to school to earn a different degree or to complete a degree they started but did not finish. During this period of time, most colleges and universities had high student enrollments. With the recession finally receding, many people who lost their jobs have found new ones. Throughout the country, most college and university student enrollments are now down compared to a few years ago. Many tribal college and university student enrollments are also down. This is actually a good time to be a junior or senior in high school. College and university recruiters are out in full force attempting to attract high school students into their institutions. In addition to federal and state grant programs, many post-secondary schools are offering generous scholarships to graduating high school seniors.

Leech Lake Tribal College has created a constellation of services called “Miikinaa.” Miikinaa is an Ojibwe word meaning “the Path.” This is a set of activities that initiate students into college. Miikinaa includes early and intensive academic advising, peer and faculty mentoring and tutoring, activities that provide learning opportunities in a cultural context to promote student retention and success. Leech Lake Tribal College documented that new entering students’ retention rates increased from 31% in 2011 to 54% in 2013. (Bill, 2014).

The survey conducted in 2011-2012 titled “Retention Factors of American Indian Students” (Day, 2012) found that one of the most successful retention strategies for American Indian students is having a “go to” person at the college. A “go to” person is either a faculty or staff person that the student can trust and depend on for advice and support when needed. In tribal colleges, the “go to” person was often an American Indian, but not always. The “go to” person is often the student’s academic advisor, but again, not always. Every post-secondary institution has a Student Services Department. The Student Services Department must make sure that every student has a “go to” person that each student can depend on, and that the “go to” person actively looks out for the student. This retention strategy can be and should be replicated on the secondary school level.

In 2013-2014, Leech Lake Tribal College established intercollegiate sports: Men's and Women's Basketball. The men and women that participated on our college basketball teams were outstanding representatives of the college. First of all, they could not play on the team if they did not have acceptable academic grades. Because of the academic requirements needed to participate, most of the players were on the academic honor role. These players often visited local high schools to talk about their experiences in college and what high school students needed to do to prepare for the vigor of college life.

In 2012, Leech Lake Tribal College began to house the ABE (Adult Basic Education) Program on campus. The ABE Program was originally located in downtown Cass Lake. Soon after the college began housing the program on campus, student enrollment and graduation numbers in the ABE Program increased significantly. ABE Graduates in 2012 was 51, in 2013 it was 54, and 72 students graduated from the ABE Program in 2014. Many of the students graduating from the ABE were teenagers that did not do well academically in high school. Housing the ABE Program on the college campus made a huge impact in how the students viewed the mission and services of the program and how graduating from the program could advance their dreams of attending college. Sarah Larson (ABE Director) shares this story of one of her ABE students who was walking through the college on his way to the GED prep class, when he began to realize that his dream of attending college was becoming a reality: "I began to actually see myself sitting in those college classes as I walked by them." Tribal colleges and universities all over the country have similar stories to this one. This is an excellent example of how tribal colleges and universities are having a major impact on the K-12 system.

#### The positive impact of Tribal Colleges & Universities

According to AIHEC, approximately one out of five American Indian students that attend a post-secondary institution in the United States today attends at a Tribal College or University (TCU). The students do this for a variety of reasons: (1) Location -the TCUs are most often located in rural areas where the students live; (2) Costs - the tuition to attend a TCU is approximately one-half the cost of mainstream institutions; (3) TCU's, by their very nature, emphasize the history, language, culture and traditions of the people they serve, whereas mainstream institutions do not do this; and (4) TCUs are the most "family friendly" institutions ever created to serve American Indian students. At Leech Lake Tribal College, the employees pitch in to buy food, cook the food, and then serve the food to all students and employees at the college every Monday free of charge. It is not unusual to have students bring their babies or toddlers to classes with them.

In a survey conducted by the Student Services Department at Leech Lake Tribal College to new entering students, the data clearly documented that 70% of the new entering students would not be in college at all if not for Leech Lake Tribal College (Student Services Department, Leech Lake Tribal College, Fall 2009). This new entering student response to this question in this type of survey is not atypical, but relatively wide-spread throughout the tribal college system. There

are a variety of reasons for this response, but largely has to do with the students' feeling that "tribal colleges, by their very nature, mission, location, and curriculum reflect that they understand the situation the American Indian student is experiencing."

A variety of TCUs have a "Head Start Program" or "Drop-In Center" on campus where the student's children can go to be safe and cared for while the parents attend classes. A variety of TCUs have "Wellness Centers" or "Wellness Programs" that teach and promote the ancient art of gardening so we can live interdependently with Mother Earth. Never take more than you need and always put something back. The secondary school systems could easily incorporate gardening into their curriculum when teaching about science, environmental science or biology. Hands-on work is often quite complimentary to book work.

Leech Lake Tribal College has developed a retention endeavor titled "Jump Start." This program is an accelerated two-week course held on and off campus that is designed to provide students with all the skills that they would need to develop in a traditional 15-week "Path to Success" course. In addition to reading and writing assignments, students learn about money management, time management, goal setting, and appropriate communication styles. Jump Start focuses on creating long-lasting relationships by bonding students together in academic and non-academic experiences: group work, rope course, and working with staff and faculty. Students learn about Anishinaabe culture and gain self-esteem through daily teachings. Students discuss grammar, create writings, and further their learning with peer reviews. The retention rates of the students that participate in Jump Start are significantly higher than the general student population retention rates. This type of early intervention can be and should be replicated in secondary schools that have significant underrepresented student populations. A "Jump Start Program" of some type specifically designed for 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Graders in the secondary school systems would be interesting, and perhaps, quite beneficial.

One of the greatest resources that TCUs provide to students is "mentoring." The "go to person" concept is more than just asking and receiving information about the best classes to take, or how to apply for the best financial aid package, it's also about listening to the students' greatest fears and concerns. Developing trust, loyalty, and rapport is a huge factor in the retention of many American Indian students. When a student feels that someone is "watching their back", it is at that time students can feel comfortable enough to really accelerate and succeed, uninhibited with obstacles and barriers that inevitably arise. The "go to person" concept is something that can be successfully incorporated on both the secondary and post-secondary levels.

### The future of Tribal Colleges and Universities

"In thinking about the future, it's good to remember that tribal colleges do not only impact the lives of their students. Tribal colleges play important roles within their home communities and among the youngest generations" (Paskus, 2012). In addition to strong academic classes and



courses, tribal colleges and universities throughout the country offer a wide variety of non-academic course offerings in their home communities such as deer hide processing, quilting, classes on herbal remedies, soap making, canning, cradleboard making, organic gardening, harvesting wild rice, appropriate techniques in boiling maple sugar, and canoe making just to name a few.

One of the greatest workforce development organizations in Indian Country are tribal colleges and universities. Whether tribal college students earn certificates, diplomas or degrees, they are much better prepared to enter the workforce on their reservations and in their communities than before they graduated from college. This makes their reservations and communities much better equipped to face all challenges that American Indian communities encounter.

Tribal college and university graduates are much better positioned to acquire higher paying jobs and careers than non-college graduates. There is a direct correlation between the amount of money a person earns and the educational level they have. One of the most proven methods of moving from poverty to middle class is earning a post-secondary degree.

As American Indian students grow up, they live in two worlds – the Indian world and the non-Indian world. For many American Indian students, both on the high school and collegiate level, students are desperately seeking more information about themselves as indigenous people – our history, traditions, customs, language, and “ways of being.” TCUs are perfectly designed to meet much of the personal and spiritual needs of American Indian students. All TCUs across the country offer the indigenous language of the community they reside in, as well as the history of their people.

Many words and phrases in the Ojibwe language do not have an English equivalent. Because of this, if we lose our language, our ceremonies would not make any sense because they are conducted in our indigenous language. Many students know and understand this and actively study the language in school so we do not lose the basis of who we are. “Who we are” is grounded in our languages. This hunger for cultural knowledge through the educational systems is not specific to the college level, it is also common on the secondary level. High schools with significant American Indian student populations need to recognize this and offer culture and language classes that meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Tribal colleges are often times a “jumping off point” from a two-year to a four-year degree, and from a four-year degree to graduate degrees. Although there are a variety of excellent tribal colleges and universities that offer bachelor’s degrees and master’s degrees, most American Indian students still attend mainstream institutions. Earning a doctorate degree in Education or Educational Administration, Law, Medicine, Counseling, Social Work, Business, etc., can help your reservation or community in countless ways. “As we look to the future of the tribal

colleges, we can expect to continue educating more teachers and counselors, training more nurses and health care providers, helping build tribal and individual enterprises through business management training, and supporting the development of a stronger workforce” (Crazy Bull, 2012).

Tribal colleges do a wonderful job serving students and their communities even though they are significantly underfunded. The United States Congress has “authorized” that each tribal college and university in the United States to receive \$8000 per full-time student (American Indian students officially enrolled in a recognized American Indian tribe and officially enrolled in a tribal college or university). However, Congress has never allocated that amount. The 2014-2015 fiscal year represents the largest amount Congress has ever “allocated” to tribal college and university students (\$6300 per student). The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) has relentlessly advocated Congress to fulfill their obligation to fully fund the tribal colleges and the \$6300 per student allocation is a significant increase over past allocations, with much thanks going to AIHEC for making this allocation a reality.

Tribal colleges and universities are most often located on American Indian reservations and American Indian tribes have their own sovereignty. Because of this, tribal colleges are not eligible for state bonding funds to construct buildings. At Leech Lake Tribal College, we just completed \$2.7 million dollar fundraising campaign to construct a new Library on campus. It took over four years to raise the funds for this project. We are now in the early stages of planning for a Wellness Center which will cost \$10 - \$12 million dollars. At the rate we can realistically raise funds in rural Minnesota, it will take us 20 years to complete the project. Obviously, this will hamper our ability to serve students and the communities we serve.

Tribal colleges and universities play a major role in the communities they serve. This has always been, and always will be the role tribal colleges serve. Despite being significantly underfunded, the future of tribal colleges and universities are promising. More and more American Indian people are realizing the necessity of earning post-secondary degrees for the sake of their family, their community, and their people. The training and experiences secured by tribal college and university faculty and staff are becoming stronger. With the guidance and mentoring of the original tribal college presidents and other educational leaders nation-wide, today’s tribal colleges and universities are well equipped to serve students and their communities well. Tribal colleges and universities will play a major role in the future of their communities and directly, or indirectly, in every part of life in the United States.