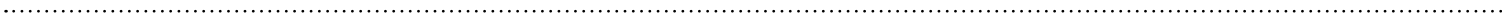


# Strengthening Native Communities through Higher Education





When a college classmate said to Jeroam Defoe that he had never met a Native American, Defoe shook his head in frustration and replied, “We’re still around.”

There are more than 6 million Native Americans in the United States, according to Census data, and Defoe is among those who is in college and thriving educationally. This past spring, he completed an associate degree at Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College (FDLTCC) in northern Minnesota with a 3.5 grade point average. He was recognized with a Student of the Year award and was honored at FDLTCC’s graduation ceremony.

Defoe is currently a junior transfer student at the University of Minnesota Duluth, and he has aspirations to one day become a tribal leader for his Fond du Lac Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa. “I want to see my people grow and thrive, and I want to help influence that,” he pledged.

If Defoe earns a bachelor’s degree, he will be the first in his family to do so. Approximately 6 to 17 percent of Native Americans between the ages of 25 and 29 hold bachelor’s degrees, according to census data from 2012–2017. This 6–17 percent range is below the rates for all other racial and ethnic groups. Approximately 42 percent of white Americans, 23 percent of African-Americans, 19 percent of Hispanics, and 61 percent of Asian-Americans in the 25–29 age range reported holding bachelor’s degrees in 2017.

Cheryl Crazy Bull, president and CEO of the American Indian College Fund, sees in this educational attainment data a continuing “crisis” yet she finds reasons for optimism in the achievements of students like Defoe. Advocates for Native college students, including Crazy Bull, are gratified when they see Native students embracing Native culture and achieving higher education success.

### **HISTORICAL CRUELTY**

The history of Native American destruction and disenfranchisement is the backdrop to the current state of affairs. The colonization of North America that began with Columbus’ arrival in 1492 decimated Native populations. Millions perished from war and disease. In the 1800s, violent forced relocations to reservations left Native tribes dispossessed of their property and sacred lands.

During the late 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, hundreds of thousands of Native children were sent to boarding schools, first established by Christian missionaries and then by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. At the boarding schools, Native students were forbidden to speak their traditional languages, stripped of their given names, and suffered physical abuse at the hands of their teachers. Captain Richard Henry Pratt, who opened the first federally funded boarding school in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, proclaimed, “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”

In the boarding schools “the experience of education became something to be feared,” said Crazy Bull. Many of those who attended boarding schools passed along a strong distrust or ambivalence toward government-controlled education to future generations. “We live with the scars of those experiences. Education is still hard,” she said.

### **TRIBALLY CONTROLLED EDUCATION**

In the 1960s, the Native American “self-determination” movement crusaded for increased Native sovereignty.

By Eric Neutuch

The first tribally controlled college, Navajo Community College (later renamed Diné College), was founded in 1968 by the Navajo Nation in rural northeast Arizona, with a mission to sustain traditional Diné culture and to provide higher education offerings inside the Navajo Nation reservation. Prior to the opening of Navajo Community College, the 26,000 square mile Navajo Nation had zero higher education institutions.

Since 1968, the number of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) has grown to 38 institutions in 16 states that enroll nearly 23,000 degree-seeking students and provide community-based services to an additional 107,000 individuals. Approximately 86 percent of degree-seeking TCU students are Native American. All TCUs offer associate degree programs, and 15 now offer bachelor's degrees, with five offering master's degrees.

Though TCUs educate only a fraction of Native students nationwide, they are, for Native tribes, a key institutional force in Native nation-building and cultural preservation. Curriculum and programs are focused on maintaining and supporting tribal communities economically, socially, and culturally.

The increasing number of TCUs offering bachelor's and master's degree programs is a key milestone, according to Carrie Billy, president and CEO of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, which comprises and advocates for TCUs. The institutions with upper-level programs can now support students all the way through to bachelor's and master's degree completion.

Additionally, TCUs play a large role in linking Native culture to educational success. "Tribal colleges achieve success by nurturing the student, their family, and their children. The most important thing that tribal colleges do for students is restoring identity," said Billy.

For Defoe, what made his experience at FDLTCC special was that "the staff knew who I was." One of his mentors was the president of the 1,041-student institution, with whom he regularly played pick-up basketball.

When he walked through a student services area, he said that he was routinely greeted by a staffer who'd holler at him, "Hey Bucky," (his nickname). When the student services staff invited him to attend an annual conference for students from all TCUs in South Dakota, he was honored. "It was a huge thing for me and one of the best decisions of my life that I went."

Billy is not surprised to hear about Defoe's aspiration to pursue tribal leadership. "When identity is being restored, it sparks a desire to give back and to rebuild your community. At TCUs, it's always, 'I'm going to college to build up my community.'"

Despite the achievements of students like Defoe, graduation rates for first-time, full-time freshman are low at many TCUs, according to a 2015 report from the Center for Minority-Serving Institutions (CMSI) at the University of Pennsylvania. The report argues that TCUs are vastly under-resourced for the work of maintaining high-quality educational and community programs.

Most TCUs rely heavily on federal allocations for their operating expenses, as they typically do not benefit from state taxpayer support. The CMSI report argues that TCUs do "not receive the federal funding they have been repeatedly promised."

Though the federal allocations to TCUs have increased from approximately \$3,000 per federally enrolled Native student in 1999 to \$7,285 per enrolled Native student today, Billy contended, "It's not enough." Federal law authorizes the TCUs to receive up to \$8,000 per enrolled Native student. Even

if this \$8,000 threshold was met by congressional appropriations, Crazy Bull said it's an "inadequate" amount.

To supplement federal funding and tuition revenue, TCUs have leveraged philanthropic dollars. The donor-funded American Indian College Fund provides millions in scholarships to needy TCU and non-TCU students. About 26 percent of Native Americans live below the poverty line, which is almost double the national poverty rate of 14 percent, according to census data. Defoe is among those who have benefited from College Fund scholarship dollars.

In addition to administering scholarships, the College Fund also sponsors supplemental advising services in collaboration with several TCUs via its Native Pathways to College Program. Services in the Native Pathways program include college readiness outreach to high schoolers, freshman year bridge programs, and transfer advising. Matthew Makomenaw, who directs the Native Pathways initiative, said, "We need to instill the belief in Native students that they can go and be successful in college."

To supplement the on-the-ground services at TCUs, the Pathways program is preparing a guidebook for Native high school students that will be available in print and online, where it will be accessible to students and school counselors nationwide. "The guidebook will provide a Native-centered perspective on the college admission process, how to pay for college, how to choose a college, and what to expect in the first-year of college," Makomenaw said.

Advertisement

**Imagine...  
The University  
of Utah**

**TOP 100 UNIVERSITIES IN THE  
WORLD 12 YEARS IN A ROW\***

**OUT-OF-STATE STUDENTS MAY  
GAIN RESIDENCY IN ONE YEAR**

**OVER 100 UNDERGRADUATE  
DEGREE PROGRAMS**

**SKIING AND RECREATION WITHIN  
MINUTES OF SALT LAKE CITY**

\*Center for World University Rankings (2018-2019)

**admissions.utah.edu | facebook.com/utahadmissions**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH**



In giving advice to non-Native counselors on how to support Native students in their schools, Shaw encourages counselors to engage in professional development and learning activities...

### EXPANDING HORIZONS

The College Fund is joined by the New Mexico-based College Horizons in efforts to raise college outcomes for Native students. College Horizons operates in the sphere of selective college admission and holds weeklong intensive summer college admission bootcamp programs for Native high school sophomores and juniors.

Raelee Fourkiller, a Native student from Oklahoma and a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, attended a College Horizons program held on the campus of Whitman College in Washington State last summer.

“Before going to College Horizons, I didn’t realize that I was the type of student who could apply to prestigious private institutions. I didn’t think that I was a student of that ability. I was thinking of applying to in-state schools, but through College Horizons, I realized that I was good enough for these schools,” she said.

Fourkiller came away from College Horizons with a plan to apply to Brown University (RI) and other selective institutions and a sense that she was “fully prepared to be successful in the college admission process.”

Now a freshman at Brown, Fourkiller plans to concentrate in ethnic studies and indigenous studies. In the future, she intends to return to the Cherokee Nation as a tribal chairperson, similar to Defoe’s aspirations, with a mission to expand educational opportunities for Native students.

Fourkiller said, “Without College Horizons, I wouldn’t be going to Brown.” She says that at her Bureau of Indian Education high school, few students from her graduating class enrolled at out-of-state colleges and that the school, while excelling in Native cultural education, lacked the capacity to advise high-achieving students on selective college admission.

In the College Horizons program, participants work in small groups as they develop college lists, draft college essays, and learn about financial aid. Each 100-student College Horizon workshop involves approximately 40 college admission officers and 20 experienced high school college counselors who stay in the dorms at the host campus location.

“The small ratio between the professionals and students is a key element of College Horizons. There’s a lot of intensive counseling,” commented Carmen Lopez, College Horizon’s executive director.

College Horizon’s program fee is \$450, although about 70 percent of students, including Fourkiller, receive scholarships that cover all or part of their enrollment fees and travel expenses.

Joan Shaw, a non-Native College Horizons college counselor volunteer who recently retired from Island School in Hawaii, said about volunteering with College Horizons: “It paid for itself 10 times over personally and professionally. It’s a powerful model that taught me a great deal.”

In giving advice to non-Native counselors on how to support Native students in their schools, Shaw encourages counselors to engage in professional development and learning activities like College Horizons. For her, experiencing the cultures, traditions, knowledge, and community of Native Americans and Native Hawaiians at College Horizons strengthened her resolve to do more to support Native students in gaining admission to selective colleges, which she plans to do as a volunteer mentor during retirement.

According to Crazy Bull and Billy, non-Native allies like Shaw are critical to creating safe and welcoming environments for Native students wherever they attend college.

Lopez encourages the college admission officers who help staff College Horizon programs to open their doors wide to admit College Horizons alumni. She also provides advice to college admission officers on which high schools from which to recruit. She said College Horizons is helping not just individual students to gain entry to selective institutions but also to change selective institutions themselves. “These institutions of higher education were created for white men. Our students are coming to campuses with an indigenous way of knowing, and they’re affirming Native culture as relevant.”

Billy, like Lopez, is determined to strengthen Native culture and traditions. She said, “Though we face challenges, we are committed to saving our languages and our people.”

Eric Neutuch is a freelance writer.

Sensitivity reader Lynn Brown is a writer and educator specializing in history, culture and place, with a passion for promoting marginalized voices in arts and education.