

Tribal colleges: a history of self-determination



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Introduction

In the United States, American Indian higher education has been a history of learning methods imposed by the Europeans, which have tried to eliminate Indian culture and this has led to the low performance of native students in higher education (AIHEC, 2019). However, by the 1960s native peoples had begun to apply key ideas of the self-determination movement to many aspects of tribal life, including higher education. Tribal leaders became convinced that higher education by natives and for natives could reaffirm the tribal culture that had been forcibly erased through European settlers (AIHEC, 2019).

In the latter half of the twentieth century as more and more people went to college, tribal leaders realized they needed to bring higher education to their communities in order to have control of their own destiny. Using any means available, the first tribal college leaders put together unused buildings and designed classrooms with available resources in order to give their tribal community members access to higher education at locations on the reservation. These tribal leaders realized what higher education could mean for overcoming barriers on isolated reservations and promoting Native American self-determination and preservation of tribal culture. They brought the campus to the people.

This paper reviews Native Americans higher education through different eras, which has led to the establishment of tribal colleges, an analysis of various federal laws leading to tribal colleges, and a look at tribal colleges as contemporary tool for self-determination and sovereignty.

Historical Periods of American Indian Higher Education

Historically, there have been three periods of Native American higher education: The Colonial Era, the Federal Era, and the Self-Determination Era (Tippeconnic et al., 2005). During the Colonial Era (from 1492 to the Revolutionary War), nine colleges were established in several of the American colonies. But, experts consider that Native education was a failure during this time. This was in part because native peoples did not see the value of European systems of education since they already had their own, and European society did not really take the goal of native education very seriously.

The Federal Era (from the American Revolution to the mid-20th Century) is characterized by many treaties and laws between the federal government and many Native nations. During this period, colleges and universities were established in the United States, but only some of these higher education institutions focused on Native American education, and vocational education became the dominant mode of education for Native Americans (Tippeconnic et al., 2005). Vocational education reflected the main attitude of the European settlers' government toward the Native tribes – try to assimilate them into mainstream culture by whatever means possible, and especially by putting them to work.

The Self-Determination Era is composed of two different trends. On the one hand, the Progressive movement in education recognized and included Native American culture in curriculum through the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (Tippeconnic et al., 2005). This was a major shift from the Federal

era ideas to assimilate Native peoples by training them to think and act more like European Americans. But on the other hand, other policies during the 1940s and 1950s ended existing treaties between Native tribes and the federal government, continued the practice of relocation - this time from reservations to cities - and overall, continued the practice of suppressing Native culture (Tippeconnic et al., 2005).

Tippeconnic et al (2005) make the argument that this last era really was a changing point - for the first time, Native people started to attend college and university and, in this way, to start to value higher education as something that could be useful not only for individual growth, but also for the tribes. Boyer (1997) wrote that Native people started to understand how higher education could maintain, preserve and grow tribal culture. This belief helped tribal leaders to think about using colleges and universities for their own purposes, which eventually led to founding tribal colleges through the Tribally Controlled Community College Act of 1978.

The following sections describe the federal laws that are important through the Federal and Self-Determination era.

Federal Laws for Native Higher Education in the Federal Era

Federal laws during the Federal era began with forcing Native peoples onto reservations, main reports on previous policies and suggestions for improvement, and arrangements with states for Native education, often at boarding schools. However, some commitments by the United States government did attempt to establish economic development on reservations, Native self-government, and preserve cultural traditions.

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Indian Citizenship Fund Act of 1819. This Act provided support for American Indian education by providing money to religious groups to promote Christianization and education among Indian tribes. Missionary reformers used the money to explore new methods for civilizing the Indians (Oppelt, 1990). The legislation was not considered effective in terms of native education, but instead really benefited Europeans by funding private educational institutions.

Dawes Act of 1887. In 1887, Congress tried to radically change the way that native people live on the reservations. The Act ended the general policy of granting land packages to tribes as a whole by granting small parcels of land to individuals. In some cases, the surplus land was given to white settlers. The individual allocation policy continued until 1934, when it was completed by the Indian Reorganization Act (Native American Documents Project, 2010). This policy set the tone of the relationship between Native peoples and the federal government for most of the 20th century.

Meriam Report of 1928. The Meriam Report documented 900 pages of the most significant investigations conducted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The report suggested that the boarding school system should be abandoned and encouraged higher education for the American Indian. The report offered a different point of view, because in the past, the education theory was to send the Indian child far away from his home, and this “modern education point of view” that the report offers is in favor of the education in the natural environment (home and family life), of the Indian child.

Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 . The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, introduced new rights for Native Americans, reversed some of the earliest privatization of their common possessions, encouraged tribal sovereignty and land management by tribes. The act slowed the allocation of tribal lands to individual members and reduced the allocation of supplementary possessions to non-members. During the next twenty years, the US government invested in infrastructure, medical assistance and education in the reserves, and many of the lands were returned to various tribes (Indian Reorganization Act of 1934).

In summary, federal laws from 1887 to 1960 enabled American Indian tribes to form constitutions and organize tribal governments. American Indian sovereignty was acknowledged. Some of these laws also provided for schools on reservations and money for loans to American Indian college students for higher education.

Federal Laws for Native Higher Education in the Self-Determination Period

During the Indian self-determination period from 1960 to the present, programs were initiated in order to guarantee the survival of the Native culture and language. The National Advisory Council for American Indian Education was created, and tribal participation in the planning and administration of tribal programs was acknowledged. This period saw the establishment and improvement of tribal colleges, including the use of a formula for ensuring stable and equitable funding for American Indian tribal colleges.

Indian Education: A National Tragedy: A National Challenge (1969). This report addressed the dropout rate among American Indian high school students and noted that American Indian students scored two grade levels below the national norm on standard achievement tests. It also indicated that a progressive regression appeared in education in that American Indian students fell further behind the national norm as they advanced through grade levels. Addressing the needs of American Indian college students, the subcommittee recommended “ that the Bureau of Indian Affairs should contract with colleges and universities to develop programs to help meet the special concerns of college students” (Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969, p. 126).

Navajo Community College Act of 1971. In the 1960s, the Navajo Nation established a higher education scholarship fund financed by oil royalties. 25 Scholarships were given to Navajo students to attend college, but the majority of the students left college in their first year. This led the leaders of this tribe to think about building their own tribal community college, which resulted in the Navajo Community College Act.

Indian Education Act of 1972 . This act served to divert more resources to local colleges, inside and outside of the reserve, and ensure Indian participation at the level of parents and community, in the administration of programs under the laws established for that purpose. Meanwhile, a smaller number of students were attending the colleges run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. By the end of the decade, approximately three-quarters of Indian students were being educated in public schools with federal subsidies. This act helped federal education initiatives provide funding for cultural heritage

programs, which emphasized tribal history, culture and language (Indian Education Act of 1972, 1973, p. 1).

Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975. In this act, Congress recognized the failures of the federal policies of the past based on a bureaucratic paternalism that deprived Native peoples of the full opportunity to develop key leadership faculties for the realization of self-government and denied the indigenous people an effective voice in the planning and implementation of the programs for the benefit of the indigenous people.

In the past, funding and federal programs were administered by federal, often non-indigenous, officials based on federal mandates that did not consider tribal needs and priorities. In the era of self-determination, a more modern conceptualization of the relation between the government of the United States and the indigenous tribes was introduced. This conceptualization minimizes the paternalistic component of guardian-protected, and emphasized the federal duty to foster self-government and tribal self-sufficiency (Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act Implementation, 1977). In summary, Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, facilitated the administration of federal benefit programs for indigenous people, mainly in education and health, which had previously been administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This gave a greater impulse to tribal autonomy.

Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978. This Act authorized the use of a formula for guarantee stable and equitable funding

for tribally controlled community colleges. “ This Act authorized grant assistance to help tribal governments in problem solving, establishing needed services, and providing resources to Indian tribes for establishing and improving tribal colleges” (Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act of 1978: 25 USC Chapter 20, 2007, p. 1).

Tribal Colleges as Tools of Self-Determination and Sovereignty

In fall 2016, there were 35 tribally controlled colleges and universities (TCUs), including twenty-two 2-year institutions and thirteen 4-year institutions. TCUs are generally tribally controlled and located on or near reservations. These institutions create environments that foster American Indian culture, languages, and traditions (de Brey et al, 2019).

The 35 TCUs were in 13 states, mainly in the Midwest and West. In fall 2016, some 16, 900 students were enrolled at TCUs, of which 13, 200 were native students. Still, native enrollment at TCUs only accounted for 9 percent of overall American Indian/ Alaska Native students enrolled in 2016, 129, 000 students – a very small subset of the 16. 3 million undergraduate students nationwide.

Tribal colleges are like mainstream community colleges, but, tribal colleges and tribal universities help preserve the irreplaceable language and cultural traditions. At the same time, tribal colleges and tribal universities offer high-quality university education to thousands of students and allow professional training and other means of economic development in the native American Indian community (Tierney, 1992).

The institution of tribal colleges and universities, and the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1975, were the key developments which have hold up the sovereignty of tribal nations. Sovereignty is defined as the authority of a state or nation to govern itself. The experience of a more defined sovereignty in higher education dates back to the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978. Those acts recognize that tribes have the right to provide education to their citizens, and in them lay the foundation for post-secondary institutions and tribal K-12 schools. Also, one of the characteristics of governance which supports the assertion that tribal colleges are an act of sovereignty is that the six original founding TCUs were chartered or sanctioned via a tribal resolution or other form of authorization.

Further, tribal colleges exemplify their direct connection to Indian tribes and tribal sovereignty through the various curricula they offer. These most often are in the form of programs and courses in American Indian studies, tribal languages, history, heritage and spiritual practices, the arts, medicinal practices, tribal government and Indian law, and other similar place-based, culturally specific curricula. Tribal experts and elders serve as advisors, teachers, and resources for such offerings. Each TCU provides the rationale and documentation for its curricula and faculty credentialing guidelines to regional accrediting agencies.

The course offerings, programs, and research endeavors at tribal colleges, in turn, improve the expertise of tribal governments through the graduates they produce. TCU students become active, organic elements of what

the tribal college offers, helping rewrite and revitalize tribal identity and development.

The ability of native peoples to design a curriculum at their own educational institutions is evidence of self-empowerment. Even though the colleges are isolated in impoverished and rural areas, they have built a curriculum that, as the emerging literature demonstrates, mirrors similar concepts that were inferred from the mission statements.

As a conclusion, it may be true that tribal college are a potential vehicle to accomplish a better future for the tribe as a whole, something that mainstream higher education has been unable to accomplish (Cajete, 2006).

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