



Learn how to keep hopes high for Native students

Rising Above the Education Challenges of Native Students

Attaining a postsecondary education is a rewarding goal for anyone, but holds even more meaning for Native American students. Only 70 percent of Native American high school students earn their diplomas, compared to a national average of 82 percent. Only 13 percent of Native American students earn a college degree, facing a number of challenges that the average student does not encounter.

From the beginning, society and education fails these students. Early school systems, such as boarding schools, were intended to assimilate Native American people and eliminate the Indian way of life, language and culture. Even today, the reservation system, and especially federally funded Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools, continue to fail Native students.

Beyond the BIE schools, western education systems, primarily off-reservation, often lack cultural understanding, relevance and a sense of inclusion for Native American students. Consider the inaccuracies taught in U.S. history classes about Christopher Columbus, the pilgrims, and the founding fathers.

Lack of funding and resources, paired with geographic isolation, further contributes to the reality that many Native students have trouble moving on to college – and this leads to lifelong hardships in self-sufficiency and wellness. From elementary to postsecondary school, poverty and disparity touches the lives of many Native American students. The BIE schools located on many reservations, for example, receive among the least amount in federal funding and, not surprisingly, produce the lowest educational attainment levels.

Many Native students do not even consider college, believing that college is not an option, but rather a dream out of reach. The majority of Native American students considering college today are also often the first in their families to do so.

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Contrary to public perception, a college education is not free for Native Americans. Joe Shields Sr., director of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe Housing Authority in South Dakota, struggles just like many non-Native parents when it comes to supporting his daughter's college education. Tuition is not waived solely because of one's heritage. "We don't get free government assistance," said Shields Sr. "I've been working since I was 16 years old."



Supporting a Solution

All of these factors are why [Partnership With Native Americans](#) (PWNA) created its [American Indian Education Fund](#) program, taking action to ensure Native American students can get the support they need to accomplish their goals for postsecondary education, service and self-sufficiency. Specifically, PWNA and AIEF services focus on helping school partners motivate students to consider college and helping students pay for college and stay in college until graduation.

The American Indian Education Fund program increases both college access and retention for Native American students hoping to achieve a college degree.

The AIEF program awards scholarships to both undergraduate and graduate students who demonstrate a serious drive to attain a degree but lack the financial support to do so. AIEF relies on its seasoned scholarship committee – Native Americans with decades of experience in Native academia – to select “best bet” students, resulting in 90-95 percent of AIEF scholars completing the college year for which they are awarded.

More than 200 college students are assisted each year through AIEF scholarships and supplies, as well as emergency funds to offset unexpected expenses – from vehicle repairs to emergency travel home – that can challenge a student’s ability to stay in college once they’ve started. AIEF’s challenge grants service encourages partner colleges to raise scholarships earmarked for Native students, motivating them with matching grants up to \$20,000. The AIEF program increases both college access and retention for Native American students hoping to achieve a college degree.

One Scholar’s Story

One such scholar that persevered in school is D’Aryn. She was awarded an AIEF scholarship in 2014 as a freshman at Black Hills State University, and awarded a second time in her junior year, easing the financial load needed to complete her biology/pre-pharmacy degree.

In recent years, D’Aryn endured the loss of two grandmothers and a cousin. Even in her grief, D’Aryn remains steadfast so she can help others with health issues, knowing that she can serve her people as “someone they can confide in.” Soon to be the first member of her immediate family to graduate college, D’Aryn plans to apply for pharmacy school and pursue a career serving her tribal community as a pharmacist.



D’Aryn hasn’t borrowed nearly as much as other college students do, thanks to scholarships like AIEF. Since freshman year, she has earned scholarships annually from multiple providers, but it’s not automatic – she must re-apply every year – and fills the gap through loans.

“Getting scholarships means everything to me and my family,” says D’Aryn. “Being a first-generation college student makes it that much more rewarding when I receive scholarship funding. The AIEF scholarship is different because they don’t just give you money to pay for school; they actually care about how you are doing.”

In addition to a scholarship, D’Aryn receives a giant holiday stocking filled with school necessities, birthday cards, care packages of snacks, books and toiletries, and calls from AIEF staff and volunteers.

Sustain Native Student Success

Help us keep hopes high for Native American students. Together, we can show them college is a realistic and attainable goal, no matter what obstacles they face, and there are people who care and want to help. Whether you donate to the AIEF scholarship fund or secure gift-in-kind donations to provide necessities like books and supplies for students, you are making an impact and helping to nudge that 13 percent a little higher. Learn more and [donate today!](#)