



Rising Above the Education Challenges of Native Students

Attaining a postsecondary education is rewarding for anyone but even more so for Native Americans. Facing several challenges that the average student does not encounter, only 16 percent of Native Americans hold a college degree while 40% of Whites do.

Since the establishment of U.S., Tribal treaties in the 1770s, the education system has failed Native students. The federally operated “Indian boarding schools” were intended to assimilate Native children and eliminate their languages, cultures, and ways of life. Even today, the federally funded Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools have the lowest federal funding and academic achievement in the country.

Beyond the BIE schools and reservations, western education systems still lack cultural understanding, relevance, and a sense of inclusion for Native Americans. Consider being a Native student in a history classroom where the inaccuracies are taught about Christopher Columbus, the pilgrims, and the founding fathers.

Lack of funding and other resources, paired with geographic isolation and limited internet access, impede many Native students from moving on to college – and this leads to lifelong hardships in self-sufficiency and wellness.

Facing disparities and inequities from elementary school on, many Native students believe college is not an option for them, but rather a dream out of reach. Most of the Native students considering college today are also often the first generation in their families to do so.

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Contrary to public perception, a college education is not free for Native Americans, and only now are we seeing movement along those lines. For example, Fort Lewis College in Colorado, a former Indian boarding school turned public liberal arts college, now waives tuition and fees for any student from a federally recognized tribe. UCLA now does too if the student is a California resident. New Mexico and Oklahoma guarantee education access for all residents – Native and non-Native alike. Tuition can also be waived for the Potawatomi to attend Notre Dame or the Seminoles to attend Florida State.

However, tuition is not always waived because of one’s heritage, and students must still meet college admissions criteria.

Supporting a Solution

To address these factors, [Partnership With Native Americans® \(PWNA\)](#) created the [American Indian Education Fund® \(AIEF\)](#) program. AIEF helps ensure Native students can get the support they need to accomplish their goals for postsecondary education, service, and self-sufficiency. PWNA and its AIEF services focus on helping students pay for college and helping school partners motivate students to apply for college and stay in college until graduation.

PWNA's 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 means to do so. AIEF relies on its seasoned Scholarship Committee – Native Americans with decades of experience in academia – to select “best bet” students. This results in 90-95 percent of AIEF scholars completing the college year for which they are awarded.

More than 200 students are aided each year through AIEF scholarships and care packs. We also offer mentoring provided by Native American professionals who are members of the PepsiCo RISE Native American workforce group. The AIEF program increases both college access and retention for Native American students hoping to achieve a college degree.

One Scholar's Story

Now in her 40s, Donnette from the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota received an American Indian Education Fund (AIEF) scholarship to finish her master's in education.

Donnette previously earned an associate degree in criminal justice and a bachelor's in general studies but then took time away to raise her daughter and care for

her parents in their final years. While at school, Donnette worked two part-time jobs. In fact, 35% of current AIEF scholars work 20 hours per week during the academic term to make ends meet.

The youngest of three, Donnette was taught by her parents to have humility and fortitude to keep working no matter the circumstance. “Everything we do, we need to create love, especially on the reservation. A lot of people grew up in poverty here, and even getting into college is such an accomplishment.”

As a student, Donnette traveled to Washington, D.C., to garner support for a college expansion and held leadership positions in several school organizations. She also ran the school's food pantry – an incredible resource for students given there is no school cafeteria and few dining options nearby.

“Education means so much to me. I was at school nine hours a day plus all the student leadership. I'm showing others that you can change your life around and do better for your people.” Outside of school, Donnette serves on the Board of Directors for Wozu, a local program focused on land, culture, and wellness. Now with her advanced degree, she can serve her community even better.

Donette shared, “Being a student is hard. I needed eight scholarships [for my last] semester, and I'm thankful for all of them. It's hard to find graduate scholarships and hardly any for education.”

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, and that no matter what obstacles they face, there are people who care and want to help. When you donate to the AIEF scholarship fund, you are making an impact and giving a gift that will last a lifetime. Learn more and [donate today!](#)

AIEF Scholarship Recipient

Donnette

