

NEWS RELEASE



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Tribal Colleges Are Serving an Important Role in Higher Education

AUSTIN, TX –

Preserving Culture and Planning for the Future: An Exploration of Student Experiences at Tribal Colleges, a report released today by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (the Center), aims to share a narrative of the students who attend these unique institutions. “Tribal colleges are often overlooked in the field of higher education, but they shouldn’t be. They are creating important opportunities for their students,” said Evelyn Waiwaiole, Executive Director of the Center.

For instance, only 10 percent of tribal college students reported being fluent in a Native American language, but 45 percent said that they intended to gain fluency while attending college, an opportunity they likely would not have at a non-tribal institution—and one that will ensure that their language survives and will be passed on to future generations. Tribal college student respondents overwhelmingly agreed that their colleges’ focus on culture and identity is a valuable aspect of their education. As one student in a focus group said, “For me, I’m proud to go to school here. It was made for us. I’m doing my best every day to make myself proud and my family proud.”

Like the national population of community college students, tribal college students face challenges that may impede their ability to persist. Tribal colleges are often in quite rural locations; therefore, unreliable transportation and a lack of Internet services can present issues for them. Additionally, tribal college students reported struggling to always afford food. Forty-nine percent of students conveyed that a lack of reliable transportation could be a cause for them to withdraw, and 25 percent reported running out of food at some point within a 12-month period and not having money to buy more.

Even with these challenges, tribal college students reported highly engaged behaviors in several areas. For example, they are more likely than Native American students at non-tribal colleges to

- take advantage of tutoring services;
- take advantage of skill labs;
- participate in service-learning activities; and
- prepare multiple drafts of papers.

Since Diné College was established by the Navajo Nation just over 50 years ago, tribal colleges have positively influenced the lives of countless students and their families. “Tribal colleges may be the only option many of these students have for higher education. Therefore, the work they are doing and the challenges their students encounter deserve continued exploration and attention,” said Waiwaiole.

Over 1,000 students across 25 tribal colleges responded to the 2017 Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*), which collects information from students about their experiences from the time they decide to enroll in college through the third week of their first term. Over 2,400 students across 22 tribal colleges responded to the 2018 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*), which gathers information from students in the spring term about their experiences throughout the academic year.

The report’s supporting materials include video clips from focus groups that the Center conducted with students, faculty, and staff at tribal colleges.

The Center for Community College Student Engagement is a service and research initiative of the Program in Higher Education Leadership in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin.