



## **NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION: CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENTS AND CONDITIONS**

**BY RAFAEL TAPIA JR.**

Obtaining a postsecondary education often seems unattainable for many Native American students. Despite facing a set of unique challenging environments and conditions, 13 percent of Native American students go on to earn a college degree. In comparison to the 28 percent of other U.S. ethnic groups who earn a degree, however, it's evident that there is a

need to better assist Native American students in educational attainment and to divert those challenges that deter them from achieving their education goals.

Native-serving nonprofit Partnership With Native Americans (PWNA) aims to combat these distinctive barriers through its education program, the American Indian Education Fund (AIEF). The American

Indian Education Fund focuses on helping students get to, pay for, and complete college. Native Americans overcome the odds day in and day out, and through the support of organizations such as PWNA and its AIEF program, have defied expectations in spite of their struggles.

### **Education Systems That Fail**

Reservation and education systems tend to fail the Native American student population. Early reservations served as prison camps intended to remove Native Americans from the general.



country. Long before many Native students even consider college, their experience and perception of school is negatively tainted. This, along with the history of Indian education, directly impacts student achievement levels and their pursuit of college. The majority of Native American students considering college are also often the first in their family to do so, and in remote and geographically-isolated communities, there are fewer role models with college degrees to motivate pursuit of a college education.

population. 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 schools, continue to fail Native American students. From elementary to postsecondary school, poverty and disparity touch the lives of many Native American students. The Bureau of Indian Education's (BIE) schools located on many reservations, for example, receive among the least amount in federal funding. This fuels a situation in where only 70 percent of Native American high school students earn their diploma, compared to a national average of 82 percent.

Western education systems beyond the BIE schools, both on and off the reservation, often lack cultural understanding, relevance and a sense of inclusion for Native American students. Consider the inaccuracies taught in U.S. history about Christopher Columbus, the pilgrims, and the founding fathers, in classrooms across the



other professionals making positive changes in tribal communities, they're encouraged to look beyond what's familiar and work toward similar goals. These community figures serve as signs of hope for students who want to step out and break the cycle of poverty

The AIEF program serves as an added support system for Native American college students. AIEF staff stays in touch with its scholarship recipients throughout the semester, provides school supplies at the beginning of the semester, and sends care packages to students and their families over the holidays. Student scholars say this added support is unexpected and they are thankful AIEF stays connected with them.

### **Misconceptions in collegiate funding**

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 other non-Native American 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."

Despite the economic obstacles many families face, more Native Americans are striving to complete a postsecondary education. 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. More than 200 college students are assisted each year through scholarships and supplies, as well as emergency funds and challenge grants to universities, tribal colleges and other groups serving large Native student populations.

Unexpected expenses, from vehicle repairs to emergency travel home, can also challenge a Native American student's ability to stay in

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school once they've enrolled in college. AIEF awards emergency funds to its college partners to assist Native American students with these unanticipated circumstances, ensuring they do not drop out of college on account of short-term expenses

### **College degrees as the unattainable**

Many American Indian students believe that college is not an option, but rather a dream out of reach. Often times, indigenous students do not apply for college simply because they lack information about the process. Students sometimes find themselves at a loss when it comes to searching for university options, selecting the right school and seeking financial assistance. Computer access for such research is also limited. Adding to this challenge, BIE schools are notoriously underfunded and turnover in BIE schools is unparalleled, leaving many Native students with inadequate access to college and career advisement.

AIEF encourages Native American students and supports high school counselors throughout its national service area in shifting perceptions about a college education from an afterthought to a reality. Former AIEF scholarship recipient Aaron Sparks looked beyond the academic challenges he faced while in high school in remote Montana and successfully enrolled in a four-year university.