The rise of the tribally-controlled college: Quietly leading the way in American Indian higher education

Christopher M. Entringer

University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract
A clash of cultures occurred in history when Europeans discovered the Americas with its diverse, indigenous peoples. One of the many negative results of this clash can be seen in the legacy of the U.S. government's dealings with American Indians and their education. Indians were very resistant to the white man's interest in their spirituality, but war and disease broke down many tribes and left them vulnerable to English dominance and control (Wright, 1989).
This Research Paper By: Christopher M. Entringer

Entitled:
THE RISE OF THE TRIBALLY-CONTROLLED COLLEGE: QUIETLY LEADING THE WAY IN AMERICAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Florence Guido-DiBrito

Date Approved: 3-26-96
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Larry Keig

Date Approved: March 27, 1996
Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

Date Received: March 27, 1996
Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling
A clash of cultures occurred in history when Europeans discovered the Americas with its diverse, indigenous peoples. One of the many negative results of this clash can be seen in the legacy of the U.S. government's dealings with American Indians and their education. Indians were very resistant to the white man's interest in their spirituality, but war and disease broke down many tribes and left them vulnerable to English dominance and control (Wright, 1989).

O'Brien (1992) told how tribal leaders requested education as one of the services from the federal government in exchange for tribal lands. Unfortunately, the long history of Indian education, at all levels, has focused mainly on the assimilation of American Indians into the white European culture and Christian religion. This has been at the expense of the rich heritage of Indian cultures and languages. For example, Warner (1992) stated that, "In the past, United States government officials considered the diversity among the over 300 contemporary Indian tribal groups as an obstacle to overcome" (p. 61). Federal education policies showed no attempt to save Indian value systems and beliefs. Only recently has the federal government recognized American/Alaska Native Indians as a diverse people with separate tribes,
cultures, and histories (Warner, 1992).

The long history of conflict and control has shown its negative effects in American Indian higher education today. The 1990 census showed that the American Indian population was 1.9 million, which was only 0.8% of the total U.S. population. In 1990, 103,000 American Indians enrolled in college, which was an increase of 11% from 1988, but this still accounted for less than one percent of all students in higher education. Furthermore, nine percent of all American Indian adults had a four-year college degree which compared to 20% of the total U.S. population. A 1989 survey of U.S. higher education institutions, which collectively served almost 75% of all American Indian students, found that 53% of the Indian students left after the first year and 75% did not complete their degrees (O'Brien, 1992).

In addition, Tierney (1992) stated that researchers have studied the under representation of racial and ethnic minorities in higher education for a long time. Though they may disagree about the exact percentages of American Indian students who attend or graduate from college, "everyone is in agreement about the gross averages, and those averages highlight problems throughout the academic pipeline"
Tierney described a model which showed that if 100 American Indian students are in the ninth grade, about 60 of them will graduate from high school. About 20 of these students will enter college, and only about three of these students will receive a college degree.

The problems and obstacles American Indian students face in higher education are important, but this analysis will focus on the success of the tribally-controlled college. Specific attention will be given to the history of neglect and control in American Indian higher education, along with the eventual rise of the tribal colleges in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. Two institutions, Navajo Community College and Oglala Lakota College, will be discussed in depth to show how American Indians have taken control of their education and preservation of their cultures. The next two sections will discuss the tribal colleges in the 1990s and their role in the future leadership of American Indian education. A final section will look at what tribal colleges can teach mainstream America about values such as wisdom, spirituality, generosity, and respect for the earth. Today's tribal colleges continue to play an important and successful role in providing higher education.
and preserving the precious values and cultures of American Indian college students.

Early American Indian Higher Education

The first attempts to provide Indians higher education occurred in colonial times. Dartmouth College, founded in 1769 by the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, was the first higher education institution founded mainly for educating Indians. The first charter stated:

The education and instruction of youth of the Indian tribes in this Land in reading, writing and all parts of Learning which will appear necessary and expedient for civilizing the Christianized Children of Pagans, as well as in all Liberal Arts and Sciences and also of English youth and any others.

(Oppelt, 1990, p. 5)

The Reverend Wheelock attempted to educate and convert Indians at Dartmouth and at an earlier institution called Moor's Charity School. Though his efforts were not considered a success, he accomplished more than the colonists before him. He brought individual Indian students into his school, which was more effective than trying to convert and civilize entire villages. Wheelock convinced some
whites that Indians could achieve a higher level of education than was ever thought possible (Oppelt, 1990).

Dartmouth also received funding from the Congregational Church and a small amount of money from the young federal government. In 1775, Dartmouth was appropriated $500 from the Continental Congress to educate, or "convert and civilize," the local Indians. This amount was raised to $5000 in 1780 which showed at least some support for educating American Indians (Oppelt, 1990).

However, Dartmouth's promises were never fully realized as white students soon outnumbered Indian students. Dartmouth had only three Indian graduates in the 18th century and nine in the 19th century. Dartmouth had the potential to educate a great number of Indians, but it abandoned educating the American Indian and developed into a prestigious college mainly for white males. This became the pattern at several other colonial institutions (Oppelt, 1990).

With limited financial support at Dartmouth and other colleges, it is not surprising that most of the money for Indian education has gone to K-12 schools. In the past, higher education was inconsistently funded. Most federal policies defined
Indian education as kindergarten through 12th grade. Higher education for American Indians was not considered a federal responsibility in treaties or trust obligations (Warner, 1992).

It was not until the late 1800s that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a branch of the U.S. Department of the Interior, provided the funds to set up Indian secondary and postsecondary schools, which included: the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, the Hampton Institute in Virginia, and the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. These schools were built "in an effort to hurry the conversion of the Indian from the hunter and warrior to a farmer" (Stein, 1990, p. 1). All of these schools were phased out with the exception of the Haskell Institute which is now the Haskell Indian Nations University (Stern, 1995).

Before 1960, only three American Indian higher education institutions received federal money which included Haskell in Kansas, the Southwestern Polytechnic Institute, and the Institute of American Indian Arts, both located in New Mexico (Warner, 1992).

Wright and Tierney (1991) also noted that in the early 20th century, colleges and universities in the U.S. made very few real efforts to provide
Indians a higher education. As late as 1932, there were only 358 Indian students with 52 known college graduates, and only five colleges offering scholarships to American Indians. A significant increase in the number of American Indians attending colleges and universities would not occur until the late 1960s.

In 1965, 7,000 American Indians were enrolled in postsecondary institutions. The tribally-controlled and governed community college played an important part in enrollment increases during the late 1960s and into the 1970s (James, 1992). Stein (1990) listed several events in the 1960s which lead to the first tribally-controlled college:

The election of President Kennedy and his message of helping others; the civil rights movement; Johnson's war on poverty; veterans of World War II gaining seats on the tribal council; higher education reaching out to the reservation; young Indians demanding a better chance at securing the American dream of the good life; and the vision of several people that a community college could work on an Indian reservation. (pp. 1-2)

The Tribally-Controlled College

1968 marked the beginnings of the tribally-controlled college. The first was Navajo
Community College on the Navajo Reservation in 1968 and then Sinte Gleska College on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in 1971 (Warner, 1992). Most of the tribal community colleges were started because tribal leaders became frustrated when very few Indian students were succeeding in traditionally white colleges and universities. Tribal colleges were close to home and helped to ease the high dropout rates of Indian students. The faculty from the community colleges began to develop curriculum which related to the cultures of the students, such as integrating tribal languages and history into college courses. Tribal colleges gave Indian students the option of obtaining a postsecondary education without abandoning the culture of the community (O'Brien, 1992).

In addition to preserving Indian culture, tribal colleges were a vital step in educational self-determination. Navajo Community College was the first college established by Indians, and for Indians. In the 1970s, fifteen similar tribal colleges were established, many of which followed the example of Navajo Community College (Oppelt, 1990).

**Navajo Community College**

Navajo Community College (NCC) is located at Tsaile in Northeastern Arizona. The campus is in
an isolated setting surrounded by mountains and the ancient Anasazi Indian ruins. The campus was built with Navajo customs and beliefs in mind. Many of the buildings are eight-sided to reflect the hogan or the traditional octagon dwelling. The Ned Hatathli Cultural Center, named after the first Navajo president, is a large octagon-shaped building which is covered with panels of copper-colored glass. A museum in the culture center houses sacred Navajo materials and recordings for chants. The isolated landscape away from cities is said to promote study and is religiously important to the Navajos (Oppelt, 1990).

The early Indians lived in an era where European colonists desired to spread the gospel and civilize the savages of America, but the Navajos now had a place to preserve and cultivate their spirituality and tribal customs, all within a higher education setting.

By the mid-1970s, NCC was not respected academically by most successful Navajo high school graduates, but its reputation has improved. The college became accredited by the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (NCA) in 1976. It became the first tribal college to be fully
accredited as a two-year college. The accreditation helped students in obtaining financial aid and in transferring credit to four-year schools (Oppelt, 1990).

NCC opened with an enrollment of around 300 students in 1969 (Oppelt, 1990). The enrollment grew to 2019 by 1994-95. Of these students, 80% were women, 56% part-time, 16% transferred in, and 1% were international. Sixty-three percent were 25 years or older, and 94% of the students were American Indian (Stern, 1995).

Most of the Navajos do not enter NCC directly out of high school. They may have attended another college or worked for a few years. Many Navajos are also poor, with family incomes below the poverty level, and parents with little formal education. These factors along with high unemployment on the reservation means that many of today's Navajos qualify for federal financial aid and tribal grants (Oppelt, 1990).

Even with the barriers, students at NCC are achieving many of their goals, such as vocational preparation, transferring to four-year colleges, along with learning and nurturing their traditional Navajo culture (Oppelt, 1990). Associate of arts degrees are offered in areas like business, computer science,
and elementary education, but there are also degrees in Navajo history and Indian studies, Navajo culture, and Navajo language. Students can study in other areas such as environmental studies, pre-engineering, or they can study pre-professional programs such as nursing, medicine, and veterinary science. Students may attend classes on the main campus in Tsaile or at a branch campus in Shiprock, New Mexico. NCC also has off-campus centers in Arizona and New Mexico which allow the Navajo students and others to attend close to where they live on the 26,000 square miles of Navajo land (Stern, 1995).

Oppelt (1990) summed up the Navajo Community College experience:

Navajo Community College provides a postsecondary setting where an Indian student may see his(her) heritage as an integral part of the curriculum. This is one of the most significant results of this first attempt at self-determination in Indian higher education. The college is also providing valuable leadership experiences for the future leaders of the Navajo Nation. (p. 38)

Oglala Lakota College

Another example of a successful tribally controlled institution is Oglala Lakota College located
on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the Western part of South Dakota. The dry, barren land in the area has long been referred to as the Badlands, and the Lakota Sioux of the reservation had the lowest per capita income in the United States in 1980, though Oglala Lakota College is said to be quietly flourishing (Mooney, 1988).

The college was established in 1971 as Oglala Sioux Community College by the Oglala Sioux Tribe. The college initially offered some classes on the reservation with the help of Black Hills State College and other state institutions. Gerald One Feather was instrumental in starting the college and was named the first president. He and other members of the tribe dreamed of having their own college to serve their people (Oppelt, 1990). From the beginning, the college has followed the philosophy, Wa Wo Ici Ya, a Lakota expression meaning, "we can do it ourselves." This expression has served as the college motto (Mooney, 1988, p. A1).

The college began receiving federal money in 1974. In 1978, Congress passed the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act which provided annual federal support for the survival of the college and other tribal institutions (Mooney, 1988).
In 1978, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) granted Oglala Sioux candidacy for accreditation. In 1983, the final step of accreditation took place when the NCA gave the college the authority to grant bachelor's degrees. The new name of the college became Oglala Lakota College (Oppelt, 1990).

Many of the tribal colleges are thought of as unique since American Indian students, a poorly served minority group, are given a chance to earn a college degree, while still being able to preserve their culture by staying close to the reservation. Students at Oglala Lakota College are being trained as teachers, nurses, and police officers, but also are being taught tribal management and Lakota studies. About 40% who register never complete high school, so the college has awarded many GEDs. Students may drift in and out of jobs off the reservation before entering the college. Most of the students enrolled at the college are nontraditional, and many of these students are women with children (Mooney, 1988).

Lack of transportation and child care services makes Oglala Lakota College very decentralized. Small buildings and trailers which house classrooms are scattered across the 700 square mile reservation.
Faculty may have to drive hundreds of miles on rough roads and through winter blizzards each day to teach. Cars are so important to students and faculty that a college catalogue featured photos of students and teachers proudly with their cars (Mooney, 1988).

Though poverty, alcoholism, governmental policies, and other social problems still effect the reservation, Oglala Lakota College gives its students a chance to succeed academically on their reservation lands in America.

Tribally-Controlled Colleges in the 1990s

Oppelt (1990) spoke in the preface of his book, The Tribally-Controlled Indian College, about how most Americans, including many American Indians, know little about the rise of the tribal college and its influence in the past and today. The tribal colleges in the 1990s are growing and becoming more influential in higher education.

Many of the tribal colleges initially struggled to stay open, and if additional funds had always been available, today's tribal colleges might be much stronger and influential. Nevertheless, six of the initial tribal college presidents met at Denver, Colorado, in 1973 to form the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) to serve the needs
of the colleges. They have worked hard to secure federal funding in support of the growing institutions (Stein, 1990). One example is the American Indian College Fund. Since 1989, it has been providing money for endowments, scholarships, equipment, and improvements to college facilities. This funding has supplemented federal funds. Federal funding has increased, but it has not kept pace with the increased tribal college enrollment. Federal money amounted to $3,000 per student in 1980 but dropped to a $2,627 per student in 1991. This amount compared to an average expenditure of $5,129 per student for all U.S. public two-year colleges in 1991 (Obrien, 1992).

In 1991, there were 23 two-year and three four-year institutions known as tribally-controlled colleges in the U.S. Seven institutions are located in Montana, five in North Dakota, and four in South Dakota. Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington, Michigan, Arizona, and California each have one college, and New Mexico has two institutions. These institutions, along with two colleges in Canada, make up the 28 member American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). Nineteen of the U.S. colleges are fully accredited and six are candidates for accreditation. Most have small student bodies ranging
from less than 200 to around 2000, and with the exception of four institutions, all were located on Indian reservations (O'Brien, 1992).

The location on the reservation is an important factor for most Indian students attending. O'Brien (1992) cited a survey of students from the seven tribal colleges in Montana. Three-fourths of the Indian students spoke about the importance of the close location. O'Brien also stated that the tribal colleges are serving a population that has not traditionally enrolled in higher education. Montana has doubled its number of Indian students in higher education through the increased enrollment at tribal colleges.

Tribal colleges as a whole have also had increases in enrollment over the past decade. In 1982, the enrollment was around 2,000, but by 1991, the enrollment had jumped to around 13,800. From 1991 to 1992, the full-time enrollment increased 20% from 5,000 to over 6,000. The 13,800 students attending the 23 two-year and three four-year tribal institutions in 1991 accounted for about 14% of the total of over 100,000 American Indian students at all colleges and universities in the U.S. (O'Brien, 1992). In summary, Ernest Boyer, the former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recently
said that tribal colleges add up to only a small percentage of American Indians in college, but they play an important spiritual role in the renewal of the American Indian people (Boyer, 1989).

The Future of the Tribal College

O'Brien (1992) stated that one in four jobs on the reservation are held by non-Indians. Most of these jobs are professional positions requiring a college degree. College educated Indians are needed to manage and protect the interests of tribal lands and resources.

Some professional Indian organizations provide the needed leadership in higher education. The American Indian Science and Engineering Society has provided camps to help students succeed in the sciences and mathematics (O'Brien, 1992). Little Big Horn College, located in Montana, has also wanted to continue to train more math and science teachers, since there is a shortage of American Indians in these fields at nearby schools and at the college (Mooney, 1988).

Another interesting fact is the large percentage of women who have held top administrative positions at the tribally-controlled colleges. Ambler (1992) stated that as many as 10 women served as college
presidents in the 28 member American Indian Higher Education Consortium in 1992. This amounted to 39% of women holding the top position in tribal colleges, compared to 11% of women who headed all colleges and universities in the United States. A large number of women also served as vice presidents, deans, faculty, and board members. Ambler (1992) cited Thelma Thomas, the president of Nebraska Indian Community College, who said that, "A lot of the divisions you find in non-Indian societies do not apply in Indian societies, perhaps because there is more respect for the individual in Indian society" (p. 10). Though women have held many leadership positions at the tribal colleges, it does not necessarily reflect the status of women throughout Indian society. Ambler continued by saying that education has always been a more acceptable avenue for females in leadership roles, and women leaders at the tribal colleges provide important role models for the young female American Indians (Ambler, 1992).

Furthermore, the family, the community, and the reservation has provided the important support system which motivates students to stay and get an education, and also gives faculty and administrators a reason to stay. Tribal colleges are said to be caring,
respectful, and concerned about equality and justice for everyone which is a style of management seen in both male and female tribal college leaders. Leadership is more balanced when compared to the continued male dominated American society (Ambler, 1992). The young American Indians will benefit greatly from these support systems and leadership styles.

With the American Indian population being young, and growing at a fast pace, there will be a continued need for higher education. Even though tribal colleges face ongoing financial problems and poor conditions on many of the reservations, tribal college presidents expect the number of tribal colleges will continue to grow as other tribes develop new schools and look to the existing colleges as their role models (O'Brien, 1992). This is good news for American Indian students who want to continue their education and preserve their precious and diverse cultures while they become the leaders of tomorrow.

What Tribal Colleges Can Teach Mainstream America

Despite efforts to preserve Indian culture at the tribal colleges, the history of cultural conflict continues for American Indians. Conflict exists between a tribal college education verses higher education from mainstream American culture. Ongoing
debate is occurring over whether tribal colleges should become more like mainstream America in their teachings and philosophies, or whether they should hold on tight to Indian language, beliefs, and histories which are taught on the reservations. This is a tough issue to resolve since the values of American Indian higher education reflect the cultures and beliefs of Indian societies. Badwound and Tierney (1996) explained how tribal colleges and their values greatly differ from mainstream America and its values in higher education. The authors quoted Astin (1982) who spoke of the meritocratic nature of U.S. higher education.

In a meritocracy... rewards are allocated on the basis of performance. The greatest rewards go to those who perform best. In a meritocratic society, competition plays a central role...

Meritocratic thinking reflects a peculiarly American occupation with measuring, ordering, and ranking. (p. 155)

Mainstream U.S. higher education enables students to achieve status and success. Success is measured by material rewards with emphasis on individual competition. Meritocratic values are also found in faculty promotions, tenure, classification, and personnel systems (Badwound & Tierney, 1996).
In contrast, American Indian culture and the tribal colleges as a whole are not meritocratic, individualistic, or competitive. Values such as generosity, sharing, respect for the earth, and respect for wisdom are cherished. Prestige is earned by sharing wealth with less fortunate individuals. Wisdom and spirituality are central qualities of American Indian leaders. Leadership may not be learned, certified, or be defined in terms of personality traits or charisma, but may come from spirituality and the workings of a higher power or being. "Indeed, it is wise individuals who sustain Indian culture and whose vision enables Indian societies to endure" (Badwound & Tierney, 1996 p. 443).

An example of leadership and wisdom was described by Belgarde (1996) who told about Indian elders who are hired by some tribal colleges as "Indian Cultural Specialists" to teach the students. These elders, with little formal education, pass on the native culture orally rather than in writing. The elders authenticate what the college students are taught by other instructors who are non-Indian.

The values and beliefs of mainstream America are not bad, and they will not change very easily, but we should not ignore values such as generosity,
sharing, respect for earth, wisdom, and spirituality which are so ingrained in American Indian cultures, but are often forgotten in our culture. An excellent example of these values is described in the educational philosophy or traditional living system of Navajo Community College which places human life in harmony with the natural world and the universe. It provides principles for protection from imperfections in life and for the development of wellbeing among the Navajo people (Navajo Community College General Catalog, 1995-1996). The values of the tribal colleges also will not change very easily.

Discussion

This brief analysis has attempted to show the importance of the tribal college in America. The history of higher education for American Indians has been a history of neglect, control, and a disregard for Indian spirituality, lands, beliefs, and cultures. The tribal colleges and their students still face many challenges and battles with the federal government, along with continued poverty, and a different world view than that of mainstream America. Yet the Lakota expression, Wa Wo Ici Ya, "We can do it ourselves," (Mooney, 1988 p. A1) is a symbol of perseverance and determination. Ultimately, the
tribal colleges will continue to lead the way in the higher education of American Indian students and in the preservation of the values and cultures of America's first peoples.
References


